WALKING IN ETERNITY

How many impossible things can *you* believe before Breakfast?

Edited by Julian Eales

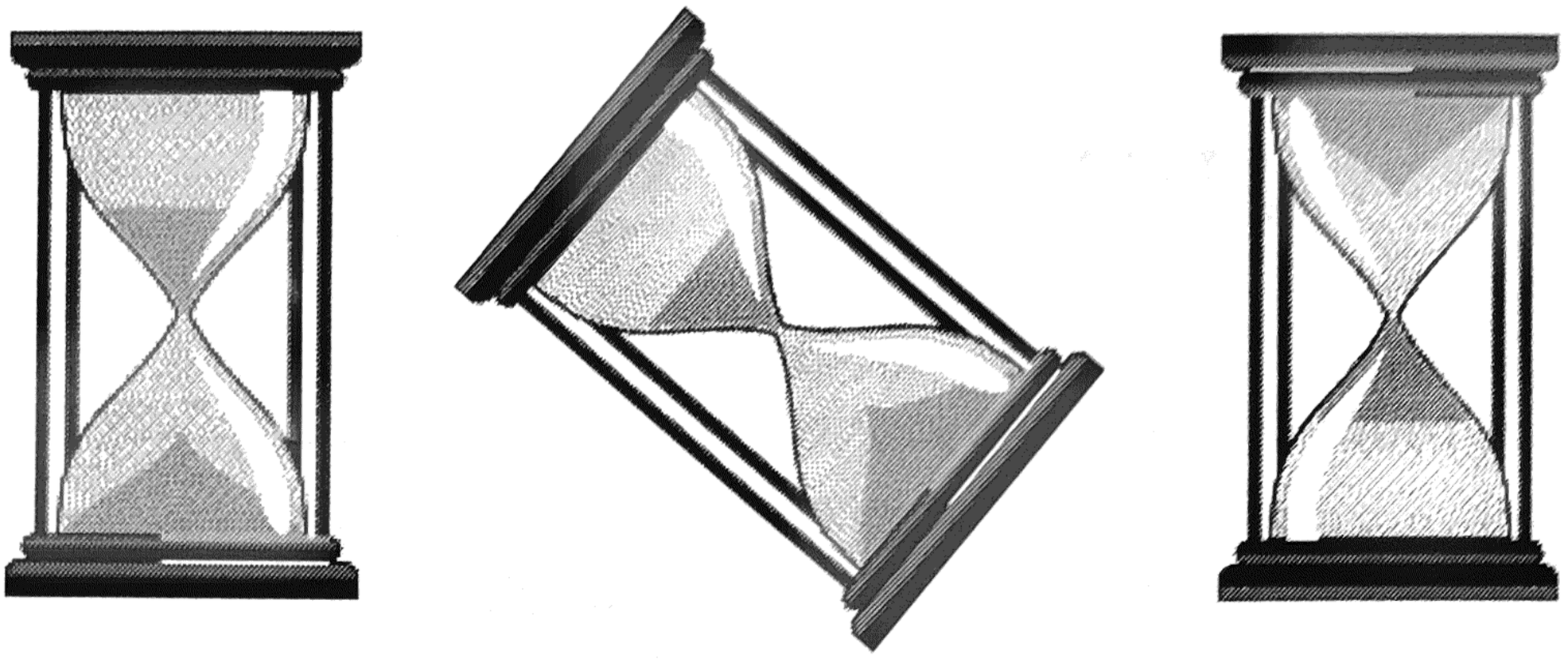
Walking In Eternity

A collection of short stories, envelope-pushing fiction
and enigmatic eccentricities designed
to make you think a little bit more
and abstractly about "The Doctor".

Collected in support of
The Foundation for the Study of Infant Death

Edited by Julian Eales

WALKING IN ETERNITY



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Foreword

I suppose now that we're firmly into the new millennium, it's safe to say that DOCTOR WHO's niche in twentieth-century culture is an unassailable one. Would-be television landmarks have fanfared and faded (THE BORGIAS, anyone? No? How about THE CLEOPATRAS?) but it's the geeky, underfunded kids' show — our geeky kids' show, and by God we're proud of it — that has seen them all off.

To put it simply, DOCTOR WHO has captured a piece of the global zeitgeist like no other British show that I can think of. It's like the Land Rover of popular culture — original, well-loved, unpretentious, inexpensive, durable, everywhere.

Oh, yes. Everywhere. Those of us who've worked on it over the years can testify to that. Twenty years on and the royalty cheques keep coming; they may be modest (I've had repeat fees for WARRIORS' GATE that wouldn't buy me a decent sandwich) but, like even the faintest of pulses, they're solid proof of life. Somewhere in the world, DOCTOR WHO is always on. And even where it isn't on, it's being discussed, rewatched, published about, imitated, satirised, analysed, argued over... and then before too long, it's on again.

It's the show that just won't die. Least enthusiastic celebrants of the fact seem to be its makers, the BBC, whom one might suspect of quietly trying to kick the plug out of the wall every now and again in the hope of inducing its demise. The corporate culture may find this an embarrassment, but whether the Corporation likes it or not, DOCTOR WHO is BBC Television's one serious contender for a world-class brand.

Not that you'd know it. If DOCTOR WHO was American, it would run for six months out of every year and we'd have seen eight or nine A-movie theatrical features from it by now. Various companions would come and go in their own short-lived spinoff series, and all of its writers would have executive producer status and be millionaires (just a little personal reverie, there).

But of course it's British, so it's off the air.

Even though it's always good for a Radio Times Special there's a persistence in belittling it, with jokes about wobbly sets and variable production values. It's like it's some home-made product whose charm all resides in the fact that we knitted it ourselves, and that we daren't take too seriously for fear of showing ourselves up. All right, so it cost nothing to make and the monsters were always crap. But that's all part of its charm. That's why we love it, don't we?

Well, no. Nobody has ever loved DOCTOR WHO for its shortcomings. Millions have loved it in spite of them.

There is a world of difference.

The show has something that no amount of hype, merchandising, cross-promotion, or focus-group analysis will ever bring you. It has mojo. By which I mean it has a vital quality that will always draw people to it but which you'll never pin down. It has a life of its own. Suppress the spirit of it in one place, and it'll pop up in another form somewhere else. Why? Because people want it to. It's as simple as that. It's like a popular tune. Ban it from the radio, and you'll hear it whistled on the streets.

The book you're holding now is a prime example.

In these pages you'll find extrapolations, parodies, exegeses, jazz riffs... examples of the infinite number of forms to which the DOCTOR WHO concept can be lent and yet still remain, unmistakably, itself. Some are serious, some aren't, some have a distinctly post-modern bent... and one or two are just bent, full stop. All go some way to feed the beast that is the appetite for WHO.

At least once, sometimes twice a year for the past decade or more, I've been approached and asked if I'd be interested in the thought of scripting a WHO movie. Never by the BBC itself, but by independent producers, would-be producers or small groups of serious fans. Usually they have it on good authority that the BBC is open to collaboration with someone who can come up with the right package. I'm sure all the other ex-WHO writers get the same kind of thing.

It never happens. Any more than the big feature films that are always on the brink of going into production (where the Doctor's been cast and it's Donald Sutherland... or it's a woman... or Tom Baker's coming back... or it's Lenny Henry...) And why do none of these initiatives ever come to anything? I can't tell you. I'm not the one to ask.

All I do know is this. DOCTOR WHO is a durable cultural artefact with its own life, breath, and momentum. The evidence is before you.

Stephen Gallagher
May 17 2001

EDITORIAL

This book operates like a fully functional TARDIS. For a start, it's bigger on the inside; packed to the gills with imaginative ideas and idealistic imagery. It also takes on many shapes:

It is a collecting tin, raising much-needed funds on behalf of the Foundation for the Study of Infant Death.

It is a calling card for a generation of new writers and artists, hungry for their shot at the big time; a foot in the door; another weapon in the arsenal of aspiring creators; an original voice in a crowd, crying 'Look at me!'

It is also an avenue for those already out there to do something different, something that would not be appropriate for the official range of Doctor Who fiction.

Anyway, I think I've stretched that particular metaphor as far as I dare! This collection is my love letter to Doctor Who. You may not believe the long drawn out battles in Doctor Who fandom that have been waged over the precise description one may call such a collection. Is it a book? Is it a fanzine? Is it professional or amateur?

It is certainly unofficial, but it contains the work of many professionally published creators, used to being paid for their labours, but working here for free. Does it make the book any less valid as a work of imaginative fiction because it does not bear the official BBC seal of approval? That is up to each and every reader to decide.

Today's Doctor Who authors are yesterday's fans, so the edges between *them* and *us* have blurred substantially. Don't be surprised if the return of Doctor Who to the small or big screen is guided by some of the names within these pages.

By the way, the term of description we eventually found general agreement upon was 'fanthology.' Personally, I like it. The market has changed quite a bit since the first spiral-bound edition of Perfect Timing was published. While the BBC have suspended publication of official short story collections, you can barely move for fanthologies, such as Perfect Timing 2 (my last baby), Missing Pieces, The Cat Who Walked Through Time, and many more, with more being announced on an almost weekly basis. It seems very strange that in a time when Doctor Who has not been in television production for twelve years, there is more new Doctor Who related product for sale than ever before...

I wanted to produce a collection of apocryphal stories; square pegs for round holes; riddles wrapped in enigmas; what-if scenarios to show not so much what Doctor Who was, but to let a little light on what it is capable of being. If continuity were a wall, with each fresh story comprising a brick, then by now, we'd have something monumental and imposing. I'm sure that puts off a lot of new people afraid of the weight of history crashing down on their heads while trying to make sense of almost forty years of continuity. I said, let's set charges and blow up the wall, and rebuild the rubble into something new. Let's see what else we can make from our Doctor Who Lego set. There are stories here which take inspiration from other genres than those normally associated with the Doctor, or with actors never before seen in the role. In another universe, Jon Pertwee regenerated into Jim Dale, and then Geoffrey Bayldon, Brian Blessed and Tony Robinson. Not this parallel Earth, of course, but wouldn't it be nice to sneak a peek at what we might have missed? Some universes, however, are better left alone. For example, you may be relieved to have avoided living in a world where David Hasselhoff's Doctor has to contend with Eminem teaching the TARDIS how to rap...

In another universe, Doctor Who is a fondly remembered half-memory of childhood, and you've perhaps purchased this oddity at a convention celebrating thirty years of Into The Labyrinth.

The philosophy of Walking In Eternity (or, to use its natty acronym of WinE) is best summed up by a conversation I had with one of the authors when I solicited his support. He asked 'Can I be as mad and bad as I really want to be?' My reply? 'Oh yes...'

Julian "Jay" Eales, May 2001
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all the old familiar places

In The Sixties

by Paul Magrs

Were there really Krotons and Quarks queuing peacefully on the platform at King's Cross? Bustling gently and eager; lumpen crystalline beings awaiting enlightenment.

That was just a dream, just a dream. All those pilgrimages they went on, all those mystics. A kind of dream we were all in. Under somebody's laconic spell. We went on a steam train up to Wales, to spend a wet weekend in an old Butlins camp, which had been commandeered for the purposes of the spiritual revolution. We went to liberate ourselves and dressed in all our feathered finery because we knew the press would be there to see us off. A gorgeous jamboree on the platform, and the train's engine and carriages bedecked with flowers and charms.

The chalets of the holiday camp reeked of incense and drugs. Music blared through the tannoy system. We arrived in hopeful droves, moving in a kind of bleeding elastic tango of compulsive need, bells and cymbals clashing, bongos bonging.

And the corrupt old mystic sat on his tasselled cushion under the fiery glitter ball in the dance hall. He had us kneeling at his feet and chanting. Did we see through his shenanigans? His hokum and blarney? Of course he was the Master under his saffron robes and beads and flowers, with his ray gun close to his twin black hearts. Once we were firmly under his heady influence, swaying and orchestrated, this otherworldly demon was exhorting us: 'You must return to London. There you must destroy Dr Who!' But we were too far gone other than to shrug and puzzle over the meaning of our spiritual leader's maniacal laughter.

Some of us got a bit of the true picture when, one night on our Welsh pilgrimage, he had us perform a full black mass and there was this awful stink of goat's cheese and boiled eggs in the dark.

I remember Sylvia Plath and Stevie Smith telling me late one night in their chalet, that what he really wanted was for the Daleks to invade Britain. He'd have really loved it. He got off on their little blue bumps and their robot arms. Just before the Seventies began, he wanted to bring them on down in their ships the size of department stores. Land them displaying their glittering windows in Sloane Square, right beside Peter Jones and extend their escalators, letting their vile automata file out onto the rainy streets. Let's see them horde and lord it down the King's Road, shooting fashion victims, photographers, the rich.

Anyway. Besieged on all sides, Sylvia said. Peculiar lizard men were meanwhile massing in caverns deep underground - did I mention them? And, in the toppled, forgotten, sunken cities of the sea - indignant fish people. It was a crazy time, full of schemes.

Dr Who's response (and this infuriated the Master) was to become a quiz show host. A light celebrity. Get his face on the cover of the Radio Times. He'd given up the crazy stuff, though he threw magnificent parties for freaks and hangers on at his house in Maida Vale. His old Police Box was the centre-piece, though only the select few were allowed to venture in for a peek during those weeklong festivals of hallucinogens and duty free.

Tall, skinny fella with a gaunt, alert face. Looked like he might have been a B movie idol in the forties, early fifties. Now in his sixties with a twitchy silver tash and combed back hair and bright blue eyes. He chimed in with the raffish bohemianism of the time by affecting Edwardian-cut clothes in extravagant shades of velvet and silk. The young girls loved him, flocking to his sides. He did them card tricks, passed out Quaaludes and enticed them into his shambolic time machine. It was like Beyond the Valley of the Dolls with the added piquant threat of alien attack and enslavement.

his decade and that decade was shutting up shop. He wanted to go out in a delicious burst of decadence and glamour, waving a big fuck-you-very-much to those, up above, who had mysteriously decided that his travelling days were done.

When he was very stoned and bitter-sounding on some nights, he would rail against the myriad injustices of the universe. His gathered guests would wonder and nod.

All the great and the good, and some of the wicked. I saw Dusty Springfield once, with Mida Slike, the international spy, Brigadier Lethbridge Stewart whispering sweet nothings into the ear of Shirley Bassey and then Tom Jones, while a stern robot dog sniffed his crotch and Reggie Kray kept an eye on the door. Cilla Black and Lulu sang a combatative 'Step Inside Love' on a gin-sodden stage, to a small crowd that included Angus Wilson, Judy Garland, Iris Murdoch, Marianne Faithfull, Brian Jones, Dirk Bogarde, John and Yoko, Michael Moorcock, Angela Carter, Joe Orton, Jackie O, Beryl Reid, a Cyberman and Jamie McCrimmon.

I saw Joe Orton take brawny misplaced Highlander Jamie to one side, into the gleaming kitchen, press him up against the split-level grill and explain how he, the greatest playwright of the age, was prepared to let the kilted, time-travelling tyke take his cock in his mouth and suck him off. It was all in Orton's diaries, found by his agent, the day after he was murdered, how he'd always longed to take Jamie McCrimmon down the throat.

'One day, Jamie, it'll all be filth like this. It'll all be fan fiction. Slash fiction. Do-what-you-want fiction. That's what we're starting here.'

And of course Jamie would do it - but only if the Cyberman could watch. It was a Cyberman mark two model, fresh from dusty Telos. The kind in extra bright and tight tinfoil and an arrogant slot for a mouth.

Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch were, yet again, discussing the problem of portraying authentic evil in the modern novel. They were on bean bags and getting through the champagne at a terrifying rate. He was all togged out like a Victorian gent, only every stitch of his apparel was a florid pink (as was his beaming face) and Iris Murdoch had her floppy-collared blouse untucked, her tweedy skirt awry. From her hair, you'd think she'd just woken up. Dr Who breezed past and told them, if they really wanted to know about the problem of evil, they ought to get themselves to the nightmare world of Skaro, where everyone was a vicious bastard. If they'd seen the final assault on the dread Dalek city, then the two of them - dilettante bourgeois humanists that they were - would understand it all.

Angus smiled gently, beguilingly, and told him that the Dalek city was simply an effusion; a symptom of the same quandary. How else was it generated in the mass unconscious; how else had it caught light in the public imagination, burning with such fervour in the hearts and minds of a nation's mechanic school children (sending them spinning round playgrounds, arms and fists extended, chanting evil lines?) - if it wasn't all a result, a dreadful psychic, delayed fallout from the not-too distant Second World War? Weren't Dr Who's dreams of easy travel elsewhere just a vision of how the world might have been?

Dr Who sniffed his warm cherry brandy and cursed novelists of all persuasions.

'He still believes that he could take us there,' Iris Murdoch said benignly. She fixed him with a baleful stare. 'That's his inner landscape he's sailing into - peopled by Mechanoids, Thals and Voord. He's an authentic English fantasist, plain as any Tolkien or Lewis. It's all whimsy with him and we ought to respect that, Angus.'

Dr Who looked slightly mollified, but felt subtly miffed. He had a certain respect for this Iris (unlike the other Iris, currently rolling around on the floor of the cloakroom with Robin, Batman's fantastically-endowed boy companion.) Though he thought Murdoch's imagination tainted by a certain continental inflection.

'If it's true,' she said carefully, 'the fourth and fifth dimension, all of that, perhaps you'd care to round off the night by taking us there?'

Angus shook his head and chuckled. 'It was just a dream, Dr Who. It's just a dream.' Then his eyes lit up, because Steed and Emma Peel had, at last, shown up, with more champagne. They were always good for a laugh.

'I get all my information from the Ministry and the divinely lissom Mrs Peel,' Wilson purred. 'That's how I move from the comedy of manners, the country house - to the global novel of paranoia, multi-

culturalism and desire on a phenomenal scale.' Iris Murdoch was explaining to Dr Who that Angus hadn't been the same since the mid-sixties, when he had started teaching English Literature at the University of East Anglia. 'Talk about the Dalek city!' she cried.

Mrs Peel flung herself down on a plastic inflatable and cast a smouldering look at Mrs Gale (who was dancing in a quite vulgar fashion in the knocked-through lounge with a delirious Jerry Cornelius). 'Put me in a novel, Angus,' Emma sighed. 'Rescue me from kitsch.'

Angus was dismayed. 'I'm afraid it's all downhill from here, my dear. Everything we do now, at this fag-end of time, it'll all wind up kitsch quite soon.'

Iris Murdoch struggled to her feet, taking hold of Susan Sontag's proffered arm. And, on the stage, David Bowie was doing a storming rendition of The Laughing Gnome. Then he went into some rambling account of how his songs were transmitted into his brain by a transsexual alien being who lived in a gorgeous pyramid on Mars.

Anais Nin, diarist and globe-trotting nymphomaniac arrived, evidently believing it was a Come-As-Your-Own-Madness party (another one.) She had dressed, to that end, in a vast, gilded birdcage, with eyes painted on her bare breasts. 'It'll do, dear,' said Dr Who, as he made his way through the press of the crowd, Marianne on his arm, murmuring softly.

Not quite the end of the decade. It was November the twelfth, 1969. John and Yoko, hairy and stoned, were still in their white wedding suits. They were wanting another bed-in, to protest something or other, but there wasn't enough futons and duvets to go round and, anyway, Dr Who didn't quite approve of that kind of thing. Not bed-ins per se, but directionless protest was a drag.

It was my birthday. I mean, the very day I was born. Not in Maida Vale, not at this gaudy carnival, in the midst of all the tinselling and streamers. I was born in Jarrow, Tyne and Wear. I didn't know it then (how could I?) but I really wanted to tell them not to get too excited, too whipped up in their premature pre-millennial fever and fervour. I wanted them not to self-destruct or to wake, queasily despondent, with massive, decades-long hangovers. I wanted the party to go on till I got time to catch up and join it.

It poured down. A very black night. The rain coming down silver and black. Early global warming and the streets heaved and pulsed with rain. Trees cracking and tumbling, shops underwater, cars and Daleks floating helplessly away. Catastrophes of JG Ballardian dimensions. I fell to grateful sleep that first, that very first night of my incredibly long life and I was content and sure that the party would go on.

It was very early morning and Maida Vale was flooding out. Waves of party guests were leaving, trashed, distressed. Noel Coward swanned in late with Dietrich piggying on his back, both decked in peacock sequins. They watched, delighted, as the dregs of Dr Who's end of the sixties do followed him into his police box.

That night, an impossible number of the clamorous throng, vanished inside. You could hear them shrieking with pleasure within.

What a magician!

Noel took hold of Dietrich's tiny hand. 'Shall we?'

She shrugged and took a sip from her black cigarette. 'Who will miss us if we go? We might as well leave with them all.' The two of them brought up the rear, nodding a curt hello to Jamie the Highlander, who looked sated and licked, bleary-eyed and sheepish.

The wooden doors shut behind them all.

After a few seconds, the light on the top of the box started to flash white, spasmodically. Then, with what sounded very much like the closing chords of the Beatles' A Day in the Life (or was it the start of Help?), it disappeared.

Silence dropped on the ruinous interior of the house in Maida Vale. Champagne soaked into the white woollen carpets. A half-finished drawing of Orton by Proctor caught light from the tip of Susan Foreman's abandoned fag.

And in the North East of England, in a hospital cot, I rolled my eyes in my sleep for the very first time. Having the first of many amused responses to a dream.

John Smith
&
The Common Men
IN THE 60'S

Pop Culture Reference

by Scott Longmuir

This story is not a part of the continuing series of adventures featuring the Doctor. It takes place between the Doctor Who Pattern Book and the Doctor Who Cookbook.

'It's funny how you can look at something every day, and never really see it.'

Now (1996)

The Doctor lay there for a while pondering this. *But then, I've never looked at it from this angle before,* he thought. At least, he assumed he hadn't. His memory seemed to be a little faint at the moment, regarding the TARDIS. Then again, it seemed to be a little faint regarding everything. Judging by the pain of the levers pushing into his back, however, it was probably safe to assume that this was not something he did very often.

The room was dark – darker than he'd ever remembered it before. The console room was darker since the refurbishment, but it was never actually *dark*. The Doctor stared at the faint glow of the blue rotor above him, and pondered again his unusual predicament.

'Cheer up,' he murmured. 'It's not like I'm dying.'

He coughed. 'Or maybe it is'. A vague memory niggled at him. 'Still, it could be worse.'

Then he saw *her*.

'It's worse.'

She was a face in the crowd, a distillation of ordinariness, ever changing, as her features seemed to shift about, seeming to morph in colour and texture from moment to moment. Surprisingly she seemed to be wearing denim jeans and a T-shirt featuring Andy Warhol's tomato soup tin.

'Nice effects,' whispered the Doctor, puzzling over the familiarity of the features. Then, realization dawned on him. 'It's you isn't it?'

She smiled. 'It's always me.' Her voice seemed distant, projected. 'Everything is me in the end.'

'You look different this time.' The Doctor tried to raise himself up from his prone position across the console. Every cell in his body informed him, individually, that they lacked even the energy to do this. He collapsed back down.

'Why does it have to be now?'

The woman gave a low whistle. 'It's a long story.'

'I'm not going anywhere.' The Doctor closed his eyes, concentrating on the continued effort of breathing. 'I just want to hear your story.'

'How much time do you have?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'The rest of my life.'

Two hours earlier (1996)

'That was amazing.'

'Thank you…I have my moments.' The Doctor smiled his infectious smile.

'Yes, but I mean, I didn't think you could do that sort of thing,' she said, pulling on her slippers.

'Not as a rule, no.' He retied the cord on his robe. 'It tends to create all sorts issues, especially when companions are involved.'

'Everything feels different – I knew it would, but still…' she trailed off.

The Doctor nodded. 'Orange juice?' He disappeared into the kitchen, so that the thin walls muffled his voice. 'I know what you mean. It's something you never forget – you're first time, that is.'

'Does it ever get easier?' He emerged carrying two precariously balanced bowls of cornflakes and two glasses of fresh orange juice, and sat opposite her at the glass table.

'Not really, Robin.' He reached across for the sugar and began spooning massive lumps onto his soggy breakfast. 'Whenever you interfere in the past as much as we did, it's always necessary to

iron out the bugs.'

'Did you just hear something – like a massive sigh of relief?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Of course, the actual memory switch-over does feel pretty surreal.'

'It's strange, but it's like I suddenly have two sets of memories- one before and one after.' Somewhere, a phone started ringing. 'Will that be the same for everyone?'

'No, just us, I think. For everyone else, it will be as though the world hasn't even changed.' The ringing continued. 'Do you want to see if you can find that phone? A week ago, I didn't even know I had one – now I can't even find the damn thing.'

Robin stood up and dashed into the kitchen. The ringing stopped, and the Doctor smiled contentedly to himself. *Finally, after a week of hell, everything was right in the world.* Soundlessly, he pitched forward into his bowl of cornflakes, unconscious.

5 Days Earlier (Late 1986)

The rattling of the train was starting to grate on Robin, who'd been forced to travel via train to university for three years. Sure it wasn't this fast, or even this luxurious, but the same, dull repetitive noise kept drawing her back to long afternoons spent avoiding looking at anybody, in case they decided to make an issue of it.

'Why a train Doctor? You know I hate trains.'

The Doctor looked up from his newspaper. 'Funny, I thought most people from your planet wanted to be train drivers when they grew up.'

'*Boys* Doctor. Most boys. Girls want to be stuff like ballerinas or pop-singers or some other stereotypical role hammered into us by old-fashioned but well meaning parents.'

'Hmm.' The Doctor was now struggling with the broadsheet paper, as lift outs kept raining about his feet. 'So what did you want to be when you grew up?'

'Taller.' The Doctor gave her a wry smile. 'Actually exactly what I became – a journalist. I always wanted to be a journalist. At least until I realised it was long hours, bad pay, hell on your social life and you might get killed.'

'And you thought you could get that travelling with me instead.'

Robin nodded. 'You're wardrobe's better.' She grabbed a bunch of the lift-outs, scrunched them up and hurled them over her shoulder. 'What about you – what did you want to be when you were younger? When you still had hair, I mean.'

'Thanks a lot.' He gave up with his paper and moved to sit next to her. 'It's funny, but I always wanted to be a fireman. I don't actually think we'd had any firemen on Gallifrey for a few hundred years. Hell, we probably hadn't had fires for a few decades. But it always struck me as a simple life.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'Fires don't have motives. They don't try to justify what they're doing – they just burn stuff down. It's not like fighting a fire can be a wrong thing.' He glanced at his watch. 'He really should be here by now.'

'That's probably why I am.' The man was young, early twenties, with a T-shirt that proclaimed that this was Spinal Tap. He was obviously very eager, yet trying to look professional. 'Mr. Bowman and Miss Somers, I presume?'

'That's correct, Joss. Pull up a pew.' The man sat down and opened up his black briefcase.

'May I begin?' The Doctor gestured to him to continue. 'Good. Now first of all…' he said pulling out a thick folder, 'my colleagues and I have had a look over your proposal as a favour to Mr. Smith, and first up I'd like to clear the air by saying that, while we're quite impressed, we really don't think this is going to be our sort of thing.'

The Doctor and Robin looked dejected, as the man flipped open the folder and began flicking through the pages. 'Now then, what we really liked was the characters. Their dynamics are good – I mean, who is this guy? Where's he from? How come he can do this stuff? But that's also your weakness…you're main character's such a man of mystery, how is anyone going to identify with him and his problems?' He flipped over a few more pages. 'No, I'd look more closely at the young girl – her issues and problems. Maybe give her a touch of romance or something.'

'But its meant to be about…' began the Doctor.

'Please, let me finish.' Joss gestured to a highlighted section. 'Now this whole paranormal stuff, I

personally really liked this – the Fendahl, the daemon guy – genius. But I have to wonder if maybe you're being too vague about a theme here – sometimes its aliens, sometimes ancient evils, sometimes its like a historical documentary. Now that may work where you come from…'

'Gallifrey,' whispered the Doctor wearily, as Robin gazed out the window gritting her teeth.

'Really? My Aunt's from there. Anyway, that stuff may work in Gallifrey, but unfortunately you're not going to get the financial backing you need here.'

'Are you done?' asked Robin wearily.

'Not quite…now, what I said earlier was that we weren't interested in this as a proposal per se. However, what I'd like is permission to adapt some of the ideas outlined here into a trimmed down show.'

The Doctor sat up attentively. 'You mean you will make it?'

'Possibly. Anyway, I'll go over this a few more times, and if we decide to directly use parts of it, I'll send you a cheque.' The man packed up and stood up to go. 'It's been nice to meet you, Mr. Bowman…Miss. Hope to see you again sometime.' He disappeared into the crowd.

Robin turned to the Doctor. 'Back to the drawing board?'

'Maybe not…you heard what he said – maybe they will make it. Or at least something close enough for our purposes.

Four days ago (1997)

The remote control bounced off the television screen, scattering batteries across the console room. Robin came running in to see the Doctor sitting in his favourite chair, seething.

'What's wrong?'

'Hmm?' He stood up. 'Oh, nothing,' he said, storming out of the room. Robin noticed he was muttering something under his breath – something like 'the vampire slayer indeed.'

Eight days ago (1974)

'I'm absolutely sick of this,' ranted the Doctor as he threw his beret across the TARDIS where it perched precariously on the hatstand. Robin walked nonchalantly through the door behind him.

'What can I say?' She pulled the door close lever. 'Try as we might, people still tune in to Baywatch.'

The Doctor gave her yet another disapproving half-smile, half-glare. 'Can't you ever be serious?'

'God, I hope not.' She lifted herself up to sit on the console edge. 'Why so glum, chum?'

'I used to enjoy going to Earth. You had yo-yos and fairy floss and Manchester United, and I could always find a nice cup of tea and a croissant.' Robin nodded. 'But lately, it's like everywhere I land, there's people that know I'm coming and they've been able to plan ahead, because they know exactly who I am.'

'And?' prompted Robin.

'And it's bloody annoying. Only people in movies walk into traps when they know that they're traps. Besides which, now when anything goes wrong its like 'Never fear, the Doctor is here.' And I hate that.'

'Come on, Doctor, you're front page news.'

'Hmm…why don't I bloody advertise while I'm at it?' said the Doctor exasperated.

'Yes. Why don't you?' asked Robin slowly.

'What are you talking about?'

'Listen. I have a cunning plan.'

7 days ago (1988)

'So you see, what they'll be looking for is another "water-cooler" show' explained the man, who's name was Larry. 'All the big networks love the 'water-cooler' shows.'

'A water- cooler show being?' prompted the Doctor.

The other man, who's name wasn't Larry, but was instead Jerry, interjected. 'You know, the sort of show that people discuss around the water-cooler the next day.'

'As a substitute for having their own lives, you mean?' asked a bored Robin.

'Probably,' agreed Larry. 'It's a buzzword.'

The waiting room was like any other, except that it was the only one with the Doctor and Robin in it. The filtered natural light barely made it across the room to the tired looking pot-plants, which sat either side of the sofa. A brown, teak desk clashed horribly with the pale green carpet and the clinical water-cooler around which, ironically, the current conversation was taking place.

'Look,' began Jerry. 'If you really want to get this thing picked up, then before you go in there,' he gestured to the door with a peacock on it, 'I think you're going to have to simplify it.'

'Dumb it down, you mean,' said Robin, slumping into the couch.

Larry glared at her. 'Did anyone ever tell you that you were really annoying?'

'Did anyone ever tell you that you were really interesting?' The Doctor shot her a 'not now' look. 'I wonder why not?' Robin picked up one of the old magazines that waiting rooms always have. 'Oh, what a shame about the Titanic,' she muttered.

'Now, as my colleague was saying,' said Larry, turning to dismiss Robin, 'simplification is the key.'

'What do you mean by simplification?' asked the Doctor.

'Take your sample précis here – the entropy one,' Jerry said, scooping up several papers from the *Bowman* folder.

'Sorry, you're going to have to be more specific,' said the Doctor.

'End of the world, lives in the balance?'

'I said, more specific.'

'Umm…Lo-go-pol-is?'

'Right.' The Doctor smiled again. 'What about it?'

'Well, first of all, what the hell is entropy?' began Jerry.

'Well, erm, technically speaking, it's nothing. The ultimate nothing. In a way.'

'Nothing!' shouted Larry incredulously. 'The episode's about nothing?'

'Actually, several episodes,' corrected Robin, as the peacock door opened and a small bespectacled woman entered.

'Funny,' the Doctor said to her. 'I think you went into the wrong bathroom.'

The woman looked puzzled for a second, then a brief smile of understanding played on her lips. She ushered the Doctor and Robin into the office.

'Good luck with your proposal,' said the Doctor as he left the room, 'whatever the hell its about.' Robin just rolled her eyes. The door slammed closed.

'Can you believe that?' Larry asked his companion, incredulous. 'A show about nothing?'

They sat in silence for a full minute. Finally, Jerry spoke.

'I think you may have something there.'

8 days ago (1977)

'Do you know what lemmings are?'

'Umm…can I phone a friend?' asked the Doctor. Robin attempted to give him the sort of look her usually gave when she said that. 'Sure I do – small furry guys, jump off cliffs a lot.'

'They don't.'

'Don't what?'

'Jump off cliffs,' said Robin, returning to her seat next to him and picking up the pen.

'Don't be stupid,' replied the Doctor, standing up so she could shuffle across. 'Anyone who knows anything about Lemmings knows they jump off cliffs.'

'Except the lemmings of course.' The Doctor shrugged and picked up his bowling ball, stepping up to the lane.

'Well, why the hell don't they?' He sent the ball spinning down for yet another gutter ball.

'You know, for a guy with his own ten-pin bowling alley in his TARDIS, you really suck at this. The Doctor was distracted, staring at the pins as they reset themselves.

'Hmm…I already explained; I used to be better, in another lifetime. And if you think this incarnation's bad, imagine running from danger in bowling shoes.' As if to demonstrate his point, he slipped sprawling down the lane while his ball just managed to take out the two far right pins. He stood up, turned around and did his embarrassing little victory jig. 'Now, about those lemmings?'

'Yes, lemmings. Don't jump off cliffs. Never have, probably never will.' They swapped positions, and the Doctor tried to surreptitiously add ten points to his score. 'That little titbit was invented by the Walt Disney Company back in the fifties.' As she spoke, she selected a red size 13 ball and took her position ready for run-up.

'Oh, like Santa Claus?'

Robin paused mid-stride. 'Disney invented Santa Claus?'

'No, Coca-cola. Not so much renovated as re-built.' He shrugged. 'They had the technology.' Robin sniffed, turned and bowled. A 7-10 split, the hardest possible spare.

'Really? I'm shocked.'

'Yeah – he used to be a small goblin guy, not a fat man in a red suit with a beard.' He looked puzzled for a second. 'I meant the man had the beard, not the suit…obviously.' Robin's second ball successfully missed both pins. She turned dejectedly back to her seat, and they swapped positions again.

'Still, proves my point,' she said, trying not to laugh as the Doctor attempted to force his fingers into a size 8 ball. 'You should advertise.'

'Advertise?'

'You know – propaganda. Disinformation.'

'Of course…humans are particularly gullible. We had all that trouble with the prototy-' The Doctor paused, looking guilty. 'Probably best if you ignore that sentence. These sort of things wreak havoc with the continuity.' He shook his head suddenly. 'Advertise how?'

'Insert yourself into pop-culture – a movie, a comic, a TV-series, a breakfast cereal – it doesn't matter.' The Doctor bowled, having finally discovered the right sized ball. 'Just get it out there, and the public will do the rest.'

The Doctor turned around just in time to miss the ball taking out four pins, his best today. 'Isn't that lying? You know what I always say about lying.'

'If you're going to do it, do it big?'

The Doctor set himself up to go again. 'That's not what I meant. This would be personal.' He began his run-up.

'Just think of it as adjusting the score.'

The ball bounced halfway into the next lane, breaking a floorboard.

6 days ago (1973)

'I'm sorry we couldn't accommodate your ideas Mr. Bowman, but it really is more of a TV idea…'

The closing door obscured the rest of the sentence. 'I can't believe it, another rejection!' said an exasperated Robin.

'Hmm…I would have thought the whole 'crime-fighters with a mysterious past' idea would have appealed,' replied the Doctor, reaching for the elevator call button.

'Maybe it's the whole mysterious past thing that's costing us commission?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'What can we do?'

'How about some of Gallifrey's real history? It can't be all that boring.'

'Think New Zealand.' The lift arrived. 'Without the sheep.' There was a moment of stunned silence.

'That bad?' questioned Robin, stepping into the waiting elevator. 'What about all that Rassilon, Omega and the Other stuff?'

'Oh, that,' began the Doctor, as Robin slapped his hand away from pressing the buttons for every floor. 'Kid's stories' he stated, matter-of-factly.

'Really?' Another nod. 'But didn't Rassilon actually invent time –travel?'

'Yep. Blew up a planet and created time-travel. Well, actually two planets. He forgot where the first one was. On account of the fact that it wasn't there anymore.' The lift arrived at the ground floor and the companions alighted. 'He also discovered the secret of immortality, in a manner of speaking.'

'Which is?' said Robin, handing their visitors passes back to reception.

'Fall into a cement mixer. Omega, on the other hand,' said the Doctor, holding the door open for Robin. 'Well, he declared his foot Chancellor and ordered it to declare war on small fuzzy dice. And that was the smartest thing he ever did?'

'Fuzzy dice?'

'It was actually a complex Nestene invasion plan, but he didn't know that at the time.' They stopped to lean on the DC Comics sign, and the Doctor began to unwrap a packet of lifesavers. 'The final straw was when he decided to communicate only in mime.' He offered the packet to Robin. 'There really are no good charades for "Help, I'm being sucked into a black hole!"

Robin popped the proffered lifesaver into her mouth. 'And the Other?'

'Well, when it turned out his name was Declan, he faded into obscurity.' As the Doctor replaced the packet in his pocket, a metal nameplate fell out, clattering to the floor.

'Ted Kraimi, Creative Director,' Robin read off the obviously just stolen plate. 'Well, not an entirely wasted trip then?'

The Doctor held out a hand for the plate. 'I've never really liked comics anyway. I mean, Fred Bassett – what the hell is that about?'

'I'm too bored, too tired and too confused to bother saying something funny.'

'That's life.'

'No, that's Fred Bassett'

Meanwhile, Ted Kraimi, creative manager of DC Comics sat staring out his window, lost in thought. A germ of an idea was working away in his mind. Every now and then he muttered to himself.

'Bowman and Robin. Bowman and Robin.'

It was almost right.

4 days ago (1963)

It was no good. They'd been trying now for four days, they'd been in more offices than the average Time Lord would see in a lifetime, and what did they have to show for it? A number of shows 'similar' to what she and the Doctor had been pitching, but always different, always just a little too different.

Robin ran her eyes down the page again. The heading 'People in Television I know' was followed by a list of crossed out names, many with little comments next to them.

She read a section at random -

'Chris: Too interested in the aliens and nothing else;

Jeff: wanted to vote people out of the ship???!

Ainsley: Only makes cooking shows;

Pinky: Cartoon character – insufficient influence;

The Brain: As above;'

It went on like that for pages, and, even scarier, they'd been in contact with pretty much all of them in the past few days. *Thank god I convinced him to not try the cartoon characters*, she thought.

It was probably time to give up. But, that was the Doctor or you - never say die. He'd just come back from a meeting in the early 1960s and they were now travelling forward a few months to see how it went. They were fast running out of options. But if they did give up, what about the changes they'd already made? Was the whole time a waste? Why was abbreviation such a long wor-?'

The ringing of a telephone interrupted her reverie. As far as Robin knew, there was no phone in the TARDIS, except maybe a line to the police outside (She'd always meant to check that). She walked out of her room, making her way to the kitchen, the phone getting louder, before it suddenly cut out to be replaced by muffled speech. Turning to the corridor on her left, she closed her eyes, picked a door at random and shoved it hard.

There was a sliding, grinding noise, and the door opened into a room that looked almost exactly like the corridor in the opening music of *Get Smart*, right down to the phone booth at the end. The Doctor was talking expressively on the phone.

'...thanks Mr. Newman, I'll let him know. Okay, bye – bye. No, you hang up first...'

The Doctor hung up the phone, and suddenly disappeared straight down. Robin approached the booth and opened the door, to find the Doctor crouched in a ball at the bottom of the booth, looking suspicious.

'We've got a series. I can't believe. Only in England could I get a series.' He gave Robin a hug, then skipped off down the corridor, before bouncing off the wall and dancing around Robin.

'Great news! But Doctor?'

'Hmm...?'

'When did we get a telephone?'

'We've always had one,' said the Doctor, taking her arms and leading her in a merry waltz.

'Why don't you tell people?'

'Are you kidding?' he asked, continuing to swirl her around. 'I travel through time with girls in their early twenties. If you knew we had a phone, we'd never get anything done.'

Now (1996)

'You're not her, are you?'

'Death?' The woman shook her head. 'No...although we do go to the same hairdresser.'

Silence rained for a few minutes as the Doctor struggled for breath to phrase his next question.

'So, who are you?'

'We'll get to that. But what we've seen so far is only the beginning' She smiled wickedly. 'The best is yet to come. Things are about to get interesting.'

Three days ago (1978)

'Socket wrench'

'Is that the big blue one or the small one that looks like an elephant?'

'Umm...the small red one with the word socket wrench written on it.'

'Okay,' said Robin, handing him the big blue one instead, which the Doctor took, hitting the console a few times with it. The lights dimmed for a fraction of a second, then the hum of the TARDIS changed key. 'Is it fixed?'

'Yes. Now, what have I told you about trying to play Quake III on the scanner?'

'Level 4 is a bastard to Deathmatch on?'

'Yes, well, don't do it again.' The scanner flickered for a moment, then switched to a picture of a woman running away from a moving hand, screaming.

'That's me, isn't it. I mean, the Sarah Jane character. The journalist.'

A look of guilt crossed the Doctor's features. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Look, the Andy-Pandy thing...'

'...it's not you, it's an amalgam of several companions...'

'...I explained that I thought the party was fancy dress. And anyway, Borusa didn't...'

The front wall of the TARDIS exploded, filling the room with smoke. Reality was tugged towards the gap in the shell, stretched thin, kicked a few times, and then returned. The smoke cleared.

Where the wall had been there was darkness, and from the darkness came a glaring bright light, flooding the whole console room, clearing away all the shadows. Dozens of voices filled the air, the rest of the TARDIS seemed to shake. The Doctor, coughing from the smoke, reached for a lever on the console, which broke off in his hand. He crushed it easily. It was cardboard.

A voice emerged from the darkness, as Robin climbed to her feet, shock on her face as she registered the different clothes she now wore. Her skirt was shorter, her shirt lower cut, her hair shorter as well, and it felt as if her face was absolutely caked in make-up.

'Okay, Tom, do you think we could do it again, and maybe tone it down a little this time? We don't want to scare the kiddies too much, okay? Alright, let's go again.'

'Doctor, what's happening?'

'I don't know...something very, very strange.' He felt as if his own body was twisting about, trying to resolve itself into a new shape.

'Action!' came the voice.

Colour drained from the world, the hum of the ship became slightly more false, and smoke seemed to appear from the small machines on the ground.

'Help!' screamed Robin, but somehow she had become unconvincing and unbelievable. The Doctor was reeling. This was not the Robin he had known.

'Wait! There's got to be a way out of this!' he shouted. 'We just have to remain calm and work out what the hell's going on.' Then he made the mistake of looking up.

The roof was gone, and all that was left was an iron girder and some lights.

'What the fu-' screamed the Doctor as his brain overloaded and shut down. Robin collapsed in a heap next to him.

Later they awoke. The ship was almost back to normal, although some parts still looked less convincing than others, reality still seemed to be unstable.

Slowly, the Doctor became aware of a voice echoing throughout the room, over and over. Looking up, he saw himself on the scanner, talking. As he watched, his face seemed to fade into that of another

man, one with brown, curly hair, talking all the while.

'You stepped into my world…my rules apply…you stepped into my world…my rules apply…you stepped…'

Later still, the voice was gone and the time-travellers had begun to come to grips with their problem.

'Fine then, you've hear my theory, what do you think?' the Doctor asked.

'It's Socratic method, isn't it? Function defines form.'

'You mean, my purpose is to be a TV star, so suddenly I am one?'

'Something like that.'

The Doctor was wrapping a bandage around his severely bruised shoulder. 'Possibly true. After all, we know there is an innate link between the perception and the reality. What I didn't know of course, is how strong it is.'

'Few people do,' said a new voice. The Doctor turned to regard the new individual. He was seven foot tall and incredibly attractive and dynamic. Robin couldn't take her eyes off him, but the Doctor simply looked disapproving.

'Let me guess. A Mary-Sue Extrusion.'

'What?' asked Robin, distractedly.

'He's the author turned into a character. Hence the egotistical description. No doubt he's all knowing as well.'

'Of course,' replied the man, shining his pearly white teeth. 'You're right, of course. About that and about the transformation thing. You're being made for television.'

'But why?'

'Because the television Doctor is much more compelling. Or much more important, or something. He matters to people a lot more, and belief shapes the universe, so…'

'So eventually, the real Doctor will become this TV Doctor?' asked Robin, horror dawning on her face.

'Exactly…now then, from now on, your lives will become more and more like television.' The man took a notepad out of his pocket. 'Now, there are certain rules to follow in order to survive a sci-fi show. Rule 1: Listen to the soundtrack. Rule 2: Never trust….'

Now (1996)

'I should have known, of course,' said the Doctor, finally managing to raise himself off the console into a sitting position. 'I should have felt things changing around me…the way my life was becoming more episodic.'

'Longer than that. It's been happening for a long time. In some ways, all your life,' said the woman.

'It's hard to know, isn't it? When something deep inside you changes, you can never tell, because it changes you as it happens.' The Doctor sighed. 'But there were clues: The way I couldn't remember for sure how many regenerations I'd had, the way the Daleks looked more advanced, despite the fact that they were earlier versions…my god, the Daleks! The used to be different, not pepper pots, more…flannelly.'

'You couldn't see it Doctor, because you were right in the middle of it.'

The Doctor paused, catching his breath. 'I've just worked out who you are.'

'Well, don't say yet, you'll ruin the rest of the story.'

Two days ago (1985)

'I can't stand him…he just pisses me off!'

'Doctor, he's you.'

'No, I'm me…he's some sort of super being. He's always right, he's always nice, he never swears or goes to the toilet and he's never bloody wrong. And I can't do that. That's not who I am…I make my way through it, yes, I save lives, yes, but I'm not so damn sure about it.'

'What about me?' asked Robin, pulling the lever to close the door. 'I've got a permanent twisted ankle, I've lost all reasoning ability and if I have to scream at something green one more time, I swear, I'll scr- I'll be very annoyed.'

'We have to stop it,' said the Doctor, as the wall again disappeared from the TARDIS. 'It's eating

our world, piece by piece. Reality is collapsing…we're through the looking glass now.'

Robin turned to the missing wall and the darkened people. 'I can't work with this,' she said, gesturing with her thumb to the Doctor. 'If anyone wants me, I'll be in my trailer.' With that, she stormed out into the dark. The Doctor closed his eyes against the attack on his senses. *It's affecting all of them,* he thought. *Robin, Zoe, the Brigadier…my god, he used to be so real and now look what he's become.* A tear trickled down his cheek at the reduction of his closest friend. *This can't be the way things happen.* The Doctor's face shifted into a resolved expression.

'A line must be drawn here!'

36 hours ago (1986)

Robin reappeared in the console room, behaving much more normally.

'Are we safe? What did you do?'

The Doctor looked up from the instruments. 'Probably. And I did the only thing I could. I took the show off the air.'

'How?'

'A man I know at the Beeb owed me a favour or two. I found his dog once, so I got him to pull the show off.'

'Good. I never want to have to go through that again.'

'Me neither.' With that, the Doctor collapsed head first onto the console. Alarms went off, and the rotor began to smoke. Robin rushed to his side in time to here the Doctor mutter something.

'What?'

'I said, please get that damn red knob out of my stomach.' Carefully, she rolled him onto the ground, watching the colour draining from his face.

'What's happening?'

'The link must have been too close…he was right…belief shapes the universe…nobody believes in me now I'm gone.'

'Are you dying?' A nod. 'Are you going to die?' A pause, then another nod. 'Can we stop it?'

'We could get the series back.'

'Right then,' said Robin, standing up and going to the phone in the corner. 'I'll talk to my contacts, see what they can do.'

'No!' shouted the Doctor. 'Don't.'

'Why not?' asked Robin, the phone in her hand.

'I don't want to see that world again. I don't want to put you through that…to take you and all the others back to being so one-dimensional. I can't handle that.' He was struggling for breath. 'Please…just let me die and go on with your life.'

Robin put down the phone and stared at the recalcitrant form of the Doctor for a full minute. 'How could I? How could I go on with my life if you die? How can you even ask that?'

She picked up the phone.

32 hours ago (1987)

'I've done all I can.'

'Are we back on the air?' the Doctor asked from his bed in the med-room

Robin shrugged. 'How would I know?'

The Doctor paused, then turned to the front wall of the TARDIS. 'Are we back on the air?'

He stared at me for what seemed like an eternity. 'Yes,' I replied. 'But you really shouldn't do that.'

'Do what?' asked Robin. 'And who the hell are you?'

'I'm the author,' I answered. 'And neither of you should really break down the fourth wall and become aware of my presence.' I sighed. 'It makes me work in first person perspective, which is just too weird.'

'So we're safe for now?' whispered the Doctor.

'Yes.' I glared at him. 'Now leave me alone, please. The prose for this is too difficult.'

'One last thing.' I nodded reluctantly. 'Are you aware of the irony of doing a post modern critique of a television series and presenting it in literary form rather than audio-visual?'

The Doctor suddenly developed a splitting headache.

Now

'You're Pop-culture, aren't you? Or at least, Pop-culture's champion?' asked the Doctor.

'I don't go in for that champion business. Too middle ages. You're right, I am Pop-culture – the Trickster and the Maverick. I am the shifting sands. To the Daleks I am *Mustafaq Camarash.*'

'Juggler of Shadows,' whispered the Doctor.

'Actually, a more literal translation would be 'Must see TV''

'Why are you here?'

'To finish you off forever. A season finale, the final cliff-hanger.'

'Then why don't you just kill me? Why torment me with your incessant story?'

'I don't need to kill you Doctor. I'm far too late for that.'

Yesterday (1993)

Reality finally seemed to have settled down. Robin stood alone in the library, staring at the shelves, not knowing where to start. The Doctor was in bed, suffering from a fever, his features sitting in constant shadow, no matter how bright the light. He was fading to black.

It was like Alzheimer's, he could only talk about the past, only remember about events before 1989. He was constantly muttering to himself – something about 'the tea getting cold'. Robin, for the first time in her life, was genuinely afraid of him.

There had to be an answer, she knew it. The show had gone again, but it hadn't killed him. Eventually, it hadn't been strong enough to break through and take over, but it seemed that the weaker it got, the weaker the Doctor got. She hadn't told him yet, but she was pretty sure if he stepped outside of the ship he would fade away to dust.

Maybe if they could bring it back, somehow, but make it different. If it was just different enough, like, say, the Doctor was half-human, then maybe it would be strong enough to support him, but too weak to take over. Or better yet, it might even break the link between the two Doctors, setting him free.

Robin picked up a book off the shelf and began to flick through it. If she was going to do this, she was going to do it right. First, do the research to make sure that this was going to work. Then, she'd have a word to Philip. She had a feeling he would be the most likely to make it work.

Now (1996)

'But of course, it's too late. You've become a TV character, fading away into obscurity. Soon you'll be nothing but memories.' Pop-culture smiled at him. 'It's quite a dramatic way to go really.'

'But Robin…she had a plan…the new show…the different one.'

'It would have killed you Doctor. As surely as you're dying now, it would have destroyed you.' She began pacing around the console. 'It's better this way. You'll live forever in their memories. That's why this had to be done. That's why I made sure the new show would fail.'

The Doctor forced his remaining energy into the anger in his voice. 'Why?'

'That's the way of Pop-culture, Doctor. You can be on top of the world one day, and a nobody the next.' She stopped and spun to face him. 'The fans will ponder what might have been, rather than seeing their god fall from grace into a pathetic battle for ratings.'

'Don't you care that it's killing me?'

'Why should I?' she asked nonchalantly. 'You're not a part of my world. You're not real. You're not my problem.'

1 hour 45 minutes ago (1996)

Robin picked up the phone. 'Hello?'

'Hello, Robin.'

'Who is this?'

'You tell me. Want to have a little fun?'

'What do you mean?' asked Robin, carefully.

'Do you like Doctor Who?'

'Sure, it's okay.' Robin was growing increasingly uneasy.

'What's your favourite episode?'

'Deadly Assassin. Look, what do you want?'

'We're going to play a little game, Robin. I'm going to ask you a question, and if you get it right the Doctor gets to live.'

'What? No!' said Robin, running to the door with the cordless phone, only to find it locked.

'Who killed the president?'

'What? Umm...the Master. No, wait, Chancellor Goth!'

'Too late, Robin'

The phone hung up with a click, and then there was a crash from the room next door. Robin grabbed a fire extinguished, smashing it into the door, breaking the lock. She rushed into the adjoining breakfast room to see the tables and chair strewn on the floor.

The Doctor was gone.

Now (1996)

'What happens to me then?'

'You'll probably make a dramatic speech and ride off into the sunset. In a manner of speaking.'

The Doctor had been gathering all his energy throughout the conversation, and with a sudden effort, sprang to his feet. Turning around, he began to frantically work the switches on the console.

'I'm not ready to fade away yet. I still want to see the world, to sing in the sky and dance with the devil in the pale moonlight. I want to be a fireman when the floods roll back, to laugh with the sinners and cry with the saints. I want to taste the air on another world, and watch the stars rise with my uncle. I want to fall in love and get hit by a train and swear at the sky from the top of the mountains. I'm not going to die today. Because...I...don't...want...to!'

The Doctor finished setting the switches and pulled the dematerialisation lever. Nothing happened. Then, the lights came up.

'Sorry, Doctor. You can't always get what you want.' The room was a set, an impressive replica of the inside of the TARDIS, but the flashing lights were just that and the levers were for show. 'It's the set of your precious new series. You see, you have no part in my world. My heroes dress in white and the villains always make a fatal mistake. People fall in love a million times and die nobly and tragically, but never stupidly. And you're not a part of it. You're real. And I don't hate you for it. I pity you.' She turned to leave. 'Goodbye Doctor. You were one of the brightest stars. I'm sorry it had to end like this.'

The Doctor fell down the console to the ground. 'Wait!' Pop-culture stopped. 'One last question... what did you want to be when you grew up?'

She stood still for half a minute. 'Young again.' And she was gone.

Robin burst through the doors, running to the collapsed figure that was barely breathing.

'Doctor, what's happened?'

'We've been cancelled.' She cradled his head. The Doctor knew he was about to die, and he twisted his face into a smile. 'I can't think of anything to say.' And with that, he stopped breathing.

Robin laid him down, locking her hands together into a fist. Tears were streaming down her face as she raised them.

'You can't die!' She thumped her fists down on his chest 'You're too real, you matter too much!' Another thump. 'You're more important than some TV character!' Another thump. She raised and lowered her hands again and again in an effort to start his hearts. Eventually, she collapsed from exhaustion, sobbing across his chest.

'You were...you were real...you weren't him...you were...too big...too deep for the small screen...Doctor?'

His eyes flickered and he gasped for breath. Robin raised herself off him, and the Doctor reached up to kiss her on the forehead.

'That's it,' he whispered. 'The answer.'

'What?' said Robin through the tears.

'Go and set the TARDIS for Ladbroke Grove in London,' he struggled for breath for a second. '1991.'

Robin stared at him. 'Doctor, what –'

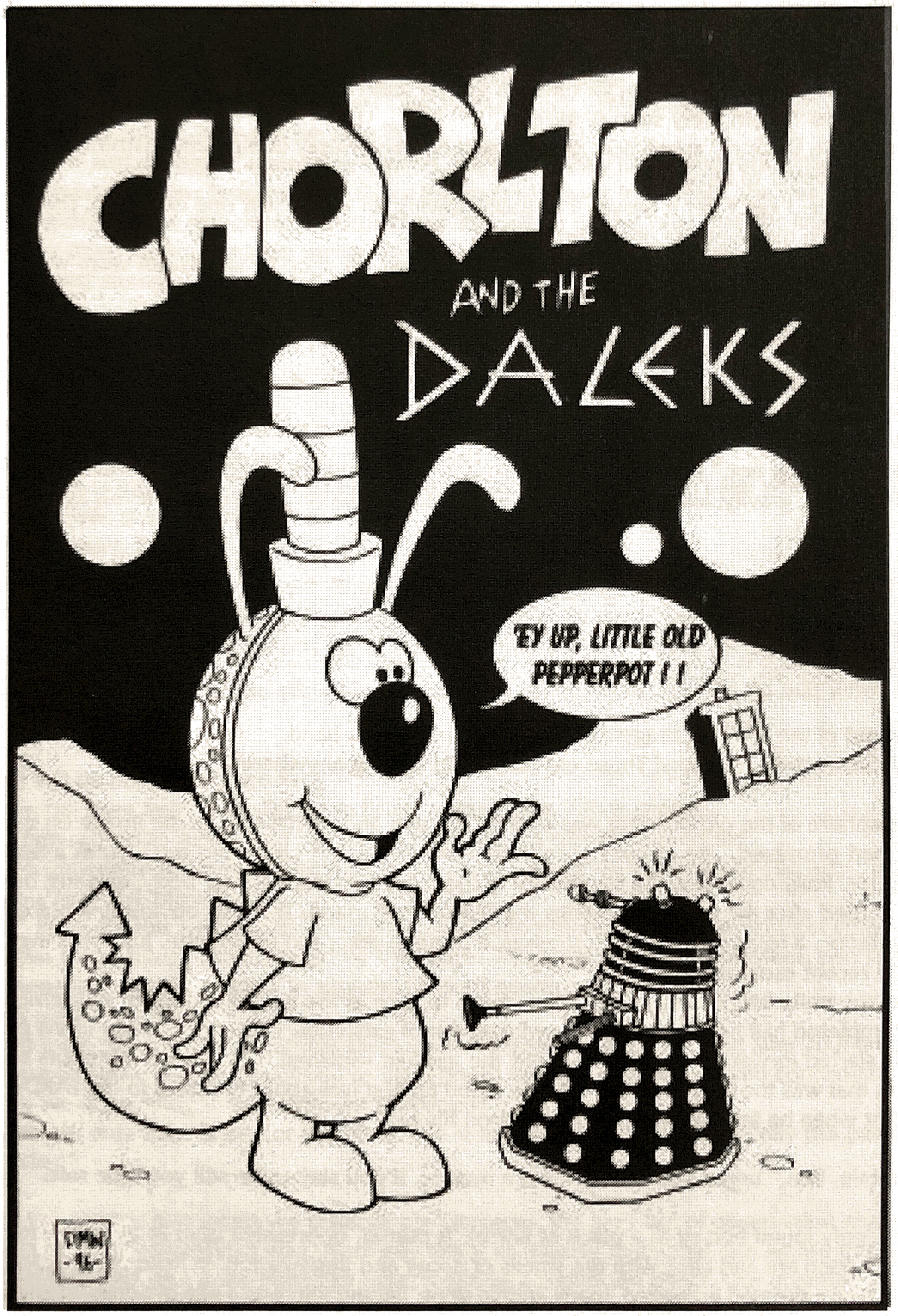
'I'll explain earlier. Now, go!' She ran from the room as the Doctor struggled to his feet and turned

to stare at one of the cameras.

'One day, I shall come back,' he paused in contemplation. 'Yes, I will come back. Until then, there are to be no tears, no regrets.' Another pause, and a tear ran out of the Doctor's left eye. 'Just go forward in all your beliefs…and…and prove to me that I am not mistaken in mine.'

Turning, he limped from towards the TARDIS. As he did so, he began to whistle, and he whistled the theme from the most popular British sci-fi series of all time.

Doctor Who: 1963 -? 'He will live in our hearts forever'



Over Your Shoulder

by Simon Exton.

"Oh, Ben, isn't it beautiful?" breathed Polly as she stared transfixed at the image on the TARDIS scanner. An elegant courtyard, surrounded by delicate fluting pillars of gleaming white marble commanded her attention. The whole structure radiated an almost tangible air of peace and serenity. It stood in a wooded glade, surrounded by lush green vegetation with a vivid blue sky overhead. "Doctor, it's wonderful!"

"That's strange," tutted the Doctor through gritted teeth as he struggled with a stiff control on the TARDIS console. "Hmm, very strange indeed."

"What's that, Doctor?" asked Ben, peering past him at an array of dials and instruments that meant nothing whatsoever to him.

"The scanner- I can't get it move. It's stuck showing an image just one direction. There could be anything at all in the opposite direction."

"Maybe the control just needs oiling," suggested Ben. "A drop of WD40 can work wonders."

"Possibly." conceded the Doctor. He didn't sound convinced.

"Oh, what does it matter?" asked Polly. "What we can see looks so beautiful and peaceful, the rest of the area can't be that bad, can it?"

"I imagine not, my dear, however. hmmm." Once again, the old man was entranced by his instruments.

"So we can go out and take a look around?"

"I don't see why not," the Doctor told her, his attention still focussed on the central console.

"Atmosphere, gravity, ambient temperature, pressure, pollution and radiation levels all look perfectly safe."

"Great! Come on then, Ben!" she cried, dragging him towards the door. "Doctor, are you coming?"

"In just a moment, my boy, I just want to check something first. I'll be out momentarily," he told them before returning his attention to the console. He scurried round to another bank of instruments. "Now that's odd. Yes, very odd indeed."

Polly ran out of the TARDIS, dragging Ben behind her by the hand.

"Hey! Slow down, duchess! Those old stones ain't going anywhere!"

The atmosphere of the old building was ever bit as calm and revitalising as the image on the TARDIS scanner had promised. The air was absolutely calm and smelt clean and fresh, with a faint hint of honeysuckle. Polly could feel the tranquillity of the place seeping into her body, calming the tension she still carried after the last few landings the TARDIS had made. This was obviously a place of peace and meditation, a haven against life's stresses, a place to relax and recuperate. Just what they needed after their recent escapades.

A radiant smile on her face, Polly span round to take in the full splendour of the temple. She'd barely completed half her turn when she winked out of existence, fading to nothing in the blink of an eye. Ben started forward to the place where the girl had vanished. There were footprints in the lush grass, but that was the only trace of Polly. He stood up and was about to return to the TARDIS to fetch the Doctor when he felt the whisper of breath on his ear.

"Don't move, Ben," urged the Doctor. "Not a muscle. If you stay quite still you'll be safe."

Polly suddenly found herself in a place of horror. A humid, oppressive cave lit by the ruddy, smoky glow of an open fire and alive with the smells of decay and degradation. In front of her stood a filthy, stick-thin figure dressed in ragged, many animal skins. Behind him was a pile of bones, stained pink by

the glow of the fire. The poor lighting threw deep, dark shadows across the pile, but Polly could still make out brown specks of dried flesh and blood and the occasional ragged clump of hair on the bones. She backed away and opened her mouth to scream, but she was grabbed from either side by strong, spidery hands. Another malodorous claw was clamped over her mouth, making her gag in revulsion. Her head was held in a strong vice as she was dragged forward towards the ragged figure before her. And all the while, the figure stroked a crude bronze dagger.

"But, Doctor, Polly's disappeared. One moment she was here and the next she'd vanished."

"I know, my boy. Yes, I know."

"But where's she gone?" Ben started to turn towards the Doctor, but felt a warning pressure on his elbow.

"Ben!" the Doctor hissed, every syllable suffused with urgency. "Believe me when I say you must stay absolutely still. If you turn around, you'll be as lost as our young friend is."

"But if we can't move, how can we help Pol?"

Polly heaved and struggled against her captors, but their skinny limbs were immensely strong. She could barely even move her head by more than a few inches. Slowly, inexorably, she was pulled towards the knife-wielder. As she got closer, she could see dark stains on the knife that she knew in her heart of hearts was dried blood. The man before her grinned, his filthy face splitting open to reveal caries-ridden yellowed stumps.

Another few scant moments and she'd be within range of the looming blade and its mad wielder. Even if Ben and the Doctor were to turn up immediately, there was no way they could get to get before she was stabbed.

"We help her by rescuing her, but you need to know where we are first."

"What do you mean, where we are? You can see where we are."

"But that's just the point, Ben, you can see where we are now. We can't see where Polly is."

"Yeah, she was snatched somehow."

"No, she wasn't. She's still here."

Polly was dragged forward inch by inch. Within moments, she was face to face with the man before her. She was close enough to smell his fetid breath on her face, to see the tiny scars and pock-marks on his face and to recoil from the glare of insanity in his eyes. He raised his arm and she shivered at the sensation of the knife against the skin of her throat. Closing her eyes, she prayed that when the end came, it would be quick.

"She can't still be here. We'd see her."

"But we can't see behind us. Do try to listen, young man. This is serious."

"But." Ben started to turn round but the vice-grip on his elbow stopped him.

"Do you remember the strange readings in the TARDIS when we first arrived? The way the scanner would show only one direction?"

"Yeah." How did this help explain anything? More importantly, how did it help get Polly back?

"I believe the readings were caused by this place. This is on the border between two Universes, yes, two separate realities existing in slightly different quantum states."

"Come again?"

"Oh, do try to concentrate – quantum mechanics as a general concept is a bit after your time so this is going to take some accepting but you're quite bright enough to grasp it if you concentrate."

"OK, so we're standing in two different Universes?"

"No, we can only exist in one or the other. We're in one and I think young Polly has passed over into the other."

"Eh?"

"There is a theory that when we observe the Universe, the very act of observation changes the Universe itself in an infinitesimal way. Normally this is absolutely negligible, but where the quantum realities are balanced on a knife-edge like here, it can be a significant effect. Our quantum states will

be sufficiently different from the ambient universal state that we will be able to shift from one universe to the next just by changing the direction of our perception. I doubt the locals would be affected."

"Sorry, Doc, you've lost me."

"Oh, dear me, perhaps Heisenburg is a bit ambitious for a beginner. Tell me, have you read any Nietzsche?"

"Nee-who?"

"Oh dear."

"Look, Doc, I don't care why Polly has disappeared- I just want to get her back."

"Oh." Lack of scientific curiosity was something the Doctor found difficult to understand in someone as intelligent as Ben, but he knew that their first priority was to rescue Polly.

"So how do we do that?"

"Just turn around."

"Eh?"

"I told you – the way we observe this Universe will affect which Universe we exist in."

"So if we turn round, we change over into this other Universe?"

"That's right. I think we should move forward a bit first, though."

"Why?"

"So we don't arrive in the same place Polly did. We don't know what's waiting for us there, but whatever it is has stopped Polly looking around all this time. Yes, in short, my boy, I think we should expect the worst."

They moved forward half a dozen paces and, in unison, spun on their heels.

Polly was just steeling herself for the worst when she heard a familiar voice cry out her name from behind her. Ben! She tried to croak out his name, but was being held too tightly.

"Ben, you move towards Polly while I distract these disagreeable ruffians. Turn her around as soon as they release her," commanded the Doctor. "Now, where did I put those Chinese thunderflashes?" Suddenly, the cave was ablaze with an actinic flash of light and a booming crash as the Doctor let fly all this thundeflashes. Polly's captors cried out and covered their ears in terror, releasing her arms. The chamber was filled with the low moaning of its inhabitants in shock. Even the mad cook before his bony brazier dropped his knife in horror. Polly felt stunned herself and clutched her arms to her chest, shivering in fear.

In a flash, Ben was at her side.

"Pol, are you alright, Duchess?" panicked Ben.

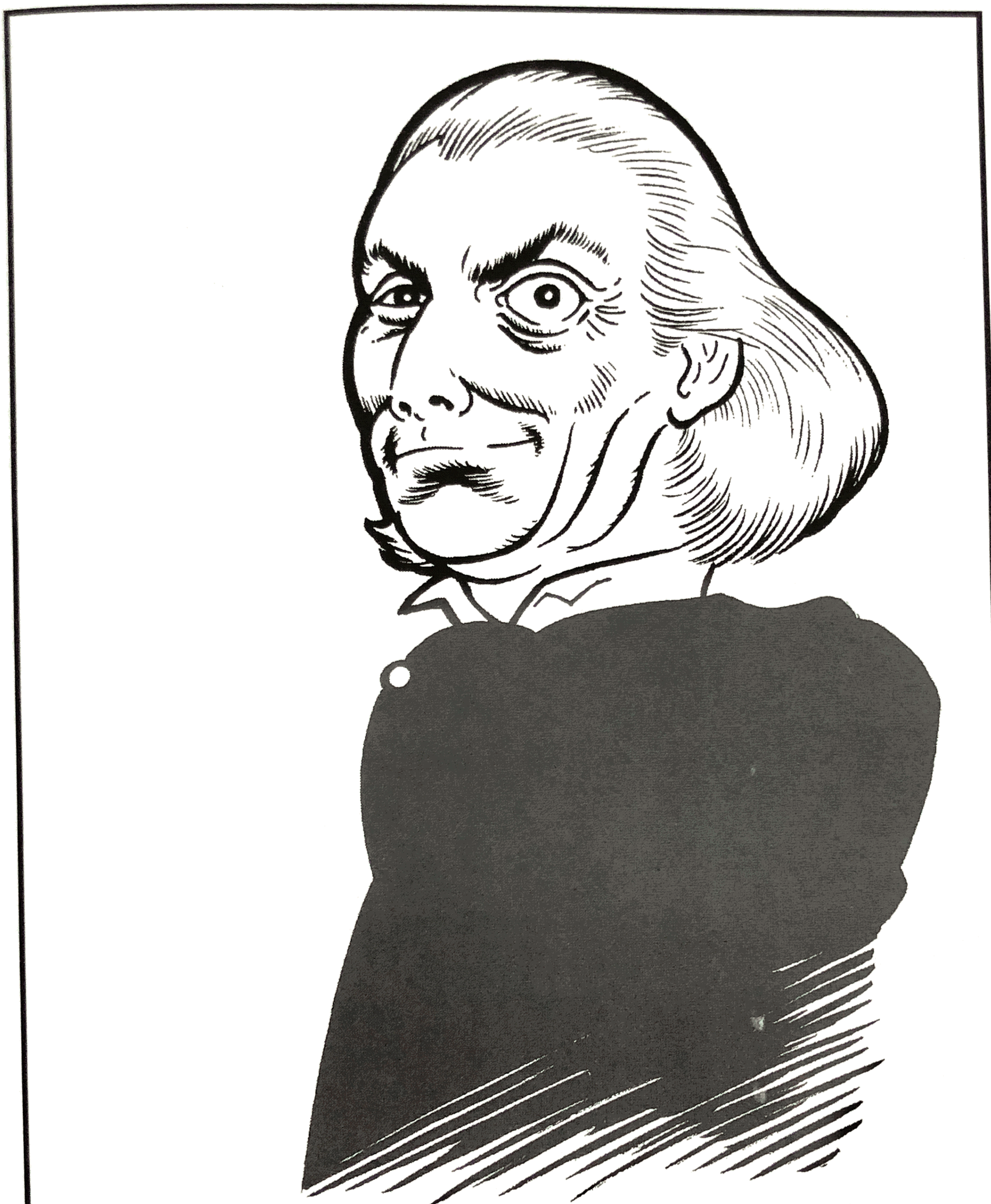
"I am now that you two are here. Where on earth am I?"

"There'll be plenty of time for explanations later, Duchess. For now, just turn around."

In the blink of an eye, Ben and Polly reappeared in the peaceful temple grove. It was as calm and tranquil as before, but Polly was still shaken from her ordeal in the cave and clung onto Ben's arm as they walked towards the centre of the grove where the Doctor stood with his back to them, calmly waiting. The reassuring shape of the TARDIS stood slightly beyond the old man.

"Doctor, can we leave now?"

"Of course we can, my dear. Walk straight to the TARDIS and don't look behind you, whatever you do. You're quite safe now.



Bryan Talbot 2001

Wetware

by Alex Steer

featuring the Second Doctor and Jamie
Mars, 2401 AD

He moved over the steep, dusty ground, always looking - instinctively, reflexively - for danger, for cover. Far below, at the bottom of a valley which had been artificially excavated so that it no longer remained in permanent shadow, was the wide blue serpent of a canal, shining the colour of a new atmosphere, lit by a small sun, and the many solar reflectors lifted into orbit over centuries.

Still a soldier, he froze as something moved, shimmered against the surface of the canal, casting up angular diffractions like the glint in an Englishman's eye. A small boat, silvery and narrow, was propelling itself through the calm waters, carrying a few occupants towards the horizon, where, blocking out half the world, a mountain rose.

He crouched, and looked at the distant sun. Nearly noon, and the sands were burning. The ground here was arid, it crumbled easily. A trickle of dust ran against the back of his shoe.

Someone was behind him.

He spun fast, pulling his knife from its place at his calf. It glinted under the remorseless sun, circling towards the attacker's throat. Seven hundred years from home, and the blade still protected him in a hostile environment. The codes of proper conflict still applied.

The Doctor blinked, once.

'Come along, Jamie,' he murmured. He pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket with a flourish of colour and speed.

'Oh... sorry, Doctor,' Jamie said. He retracted his arm, but the knife was gone. The Doctor smiled, and retrieved it from the folds of his handkerchief.

'We've got to be at the city by this evening.' He motioned towards the distance. 'We're having dinner at the Embassy.'

Jamie eyed the mountain suspiciously. 'Oh, aye?'

'Hmm. And I'm sure you won't be needing this.' He took the knife, and it disappeared into the folds of his coat. He took a deep breath, as if tasting the air. 'This way, I think.' He started down the valley side, towards the canal.

After a few seconds, Jamie followed him. 'How far is it?'

The Doctor stopped, turned. 'That depends on how you travel. We can take a boat if you like.'

'Or?'

'Well, we could swim...'

His voice tailed off as he turned and continued down the slope. Jamie moved sideways, feet shifting in a column of writhing sand. He preferred mud, he decided.

'So, where is this city?' He tried to sound conversational.

The Doctor suddenly paused again, and Jamie almost collided with him before regaining his footing. 'Olympus Mons, Jamie,' he said as if it were obvious. He pointed towards the shape on the horizon, his arm just longer than its baggy sleeve. 'The highest land above sea level in the solar system.'

'Oh. Right.'

For a moment the Doctor's face folded into a frown, as if he were trying to remember something long-forgotten, or learn something new. 'Do you know, I can't remember ever going there before.' He waved his arms like an impatient child. 'Come on!' He broke into a stride.

Jamie followed, trying to keep his footing. Then something shifted, kept shifting, and he found himself falling.

'Oh, Jamie...'

He opened his eyes. Memories and dust began to settle as he focused and became accustomed to the sudden darkness. He was covered in more of the red sand, in his hair and his clothes. Far above, he could see daylight.

He sat up, shook his head. 'What happened?'

The Doctor was a few feet away, standing uneasily and patting the dust from his trousers. 'I don't know. And before you ask where we are, I don't know that either. But I think we'll be late for dinner. Look.'

He was pointing at something in the darkness. Something vast.

They stepped closer. It was a cluster of metal and crystal columns, each one easily two metres thick, several times that high. The crystal ones were glowing faintly, throwing a faint green cast over the cavern.

'It's like some sort of tomb,' Jamie said at last. Transfixed, he moved forward slightly, hand outstretched.

'Careful, Jamie!' snapped the Doctor, snatching his hand. 'I think it's still very much alive...'

'Alive?' He was half-whispering, in spite of himself. 'How come they didn't find it when they did all this digging?'

'Terraforming.' The Doctor frowned. 'I don't know. Maybe it didn't want to be found.' He reached out gingerly, and placed a palm on one of the crystal columns. He closed his eyes for a second. 'Yes, it's definitely alive.'

Jamie moved forward again, stretched out a palm. Suddenly the Doctor's eyes flicked open.

'Get back!' The words echoed around the chamberand disappeared into the darkness. 'It's a bomb.'

'Is it dangerous?'

The Doctor stared at him. 'It's a bomb, Jamie,' he repeated. 'Probably large and powerful enough to take this planet apart.' He looked back at the structure. 'It must have been here for centuries...'

'Well, if it's not going to be going off any time soon...'

'I rather think we've just armed it, Jamie. We've woken up the Big Bad Wolf, and he isn't very happy.'

'So, how long have we got before..?'

The Doctor was moving around nervously, looking between Jamie, the structure and the daylight up above. 'I don't know! But if we don't... Oh, if we don't, the consequences could be disastrous!'

Jamie found himself moving closer, looking around the base of the front column. 'Is there any way to stop it? To break it?'

'It's not a machine, Jamie. And we're not Luddites.' He paused. 'But you might be right. Look behind that column.'

Between two of the clustered columns was a small gap, hidden in shadow. Jamie pressed himself against the warm, glowing crystal. Behind him, the metal pillar pressed against his back, ice cold in the darkness.

For a second, he lost all sense of balance and direction. It was as if a thousand voices were shouting, far away, calling him.

'It's too... tight,' he managed to gasp out.

'I'll help you,' the Doctor said. He darted over, and pushed against Jamie's side, straining with the effort.

'Careful, Doctor!'

'Sorry, Jamie.' The Doctor gave a final push and Jamie was through, into the moss-green hollow. 'What can you see?'

To all sides, green and metal pillars stretched up into the darkness. Constantly, Jamie's mind looked for points of reference, for comparisons. They were like a fortress wall, designed to protect, enclose and defend.

In the centre of the circle was a small dome, about five feet wide and one high. It was made of the same luminescent crystal, only brighter. Along the ground ran metal spokes, inches thick, linking the pillars.

'It's incredible. Can you see it, Doctor?'

'Yes. I can see it.' He paused. 'Somewhere in there is a wetware component.'

'A what?' Jamie asked.

'A mind. A very old, very powerful one. That's what is powering the bomb.'

'Can it hear us?'

'I doubt it. Can you hear the insects?' He smiled. 'It was probably human, once. Or humanoid. These things usually are. Not any more, of course. Now it's something much worse...'

Jamie dropped to his knees, feeling the sand digging in. He put his hands down, palms up, under the lid of the dome, where it touched the ground.

'Stop!' The Doctor was leaning forward, arms reaching through the gap in a futile gesture of

protection. Jamie froze. 'That's its brain, Jamie. If you try to crack open its skull it's bound to react.' He moved round to the front column. 'I'll see if I can distract it.'

'Distract it?'

'While you disconnect its brain.'

'Well, how do I know what I'm looking for?' Jamie asked.

The Doctor frowned. 'I'm not sure. But you'll know when you find it.' He beamed at him.

Jamie reached into his belt for the comforting shape of his blade. It was gone. For a moment his mind raced through insecurity, and then he remembered.

'Doctor,' he called, 'I need my knife.'

Beyond the wall of pillars, he patted his pockets, searching hurriedly. After a while his hands stopped their progression, and paused halfway down his coat.

'It must have fallen out when we landed, Jamie. You'll have to find another way in.'

He stretched out his hands to the glowing column and closed his eyes. 'Now... I need to concentrate...' His face folded into shadow. The structure responded instantly to his touch, and the green light began to fade.

Slowly, this time using the instincts of the hunter and not the warrior, he slid his fingers under the lip of the hemisphere. It was cool, but there was something almost organic in its coolness, like the body of a dead man. He wrenched at it, pulling off the protective cover.

What lay beneath was like nothing he had ever seen. A pool of sparkling grey liquid, a midnight fluid shot through with shafts of light. Half an arm's length deep lay a cluster of silver-green shapes, both globular and angular; something between embryo and brain, surrounded and supported by a metal framework. It was moving, but slowly, the rhythmical throbbing of vestigial sub-limbs dying as it diverted its energies to whatever mental attack the Doctor was launching.

Jamie reached out, his hand parallel with the surface of the fluid tank. Gradually he lowered his arm until finally, slowly, contact was made.

The fluid was cold, almost silky, not like water at all, he now realised. Slowly, he pressed down, fingers moving towards the mind at the heart of the pool, ready to wrench it from its incubation.

why are you attacking me?

The words were an echo of thought inside Jamie's mind, like a memory of words recently said. Somehow, he knew to respond. He closed his eyes.

'The Doctor says you're dangerous,' he whispered.

and how does he know? what right does he have to attack a living being? to order you to do it?

'No-one orders me,' Jamie hissed, more violently than he had intended.

no? then why do you do what he tells you?

'Because he's right. You're a bomb. If you go off, you'll destroy this planet.'

his words. his ideas. what about your ideas? the fact that i would also destroy you, if i were a bomb?

'You are a bomb.'

only because he says so. i am the wetware component.

Instinctively, Jamie looked over towards the Doctor. His face was in shadow, occasionally illuminated a sickly green by the light from the structure.

'Bombs are dangerous.' He reached further, straining the muscles in his arms, trying to reach the core, trying to get a grip. 'I have... to shut... you down.'

dangerous like englishmen?

'Yes.' He answered automatically, staring down into the grey fluid.

dangerous like daleks? or cybermen, or yeti, or macra? or just something else you do not understand that he does? something he wants you to take care of?

'Listen, I trust the Doctor...'

of course you do. they all do, you know. ben, polly, victoria... all of them. they trust him so much, they kill living beings because he asks them to.

'You're not a living being!'

then why are you talking to me?

'You're not human any more.'

of biology. perhaps if you understood the things his people have done to their own bodies... the things they do to their weapons, until maker and made are one and the same. if you could see that, you would not believe him so readily.

'Stop,' murmured Jamie.

i am a bomb, and not a human, because he wants me to be a bomb. he wants me destroyed. but where he comes from, whether i am a weapon or a god depends only on what - or whom - you choose to believe. is it coincidence that you came here today, to this planet, of all the places in the universe i could have been buried? is it fate that he knows what i am? that he can attack my defences with such ease? you are a soldier, jamie. you know that in war nothing happens by chance, but only by stealth.

'Stop.'

even if i am a bomb, would one footstep activate me where decades of machinery failed? how do you know that i am armed? and do you really think he lost your knife by accident, when you would need it? he has set this as the day of battle, jamie. he has forced you to destroy me. perhaps i am something his people left behind, something they do not want the rest of the universe to know about. he is using you. he is taking away your choice, your freedom. he has seen so many things. he has drained the power of devices you cannot even imagine. and it has changed him, jamie. he has made himself the biggest bomb in the universe...

'Stop it!' Jamie shouted. His voice fled to the far corners of the chamber. Silence fell again, oppressively.

It is not human, he thought. It helped, as it had helped when his family had been fighting the English. Here, the enemy was powerful enough to destroy whole worlds. Once, a long time ago, it had been human, but not any more. Now it wanted to destroy any trace of that past. The Doctor had told him that.

After Culloden, he had needed someone to trust. The Doctor and his magic cabinet had seemed so obvious, somehow. Jamie had never questioned it before: he treated Cybermen and weed creatures just as he had treated the English. They were the enemy; they were trying to break up his people. Always the explanation was the same. Wherever he went and whatever he fought, they were always trying to replace like with unlike, trying to destroy, trying to forget their humanity; their kinship. And it didn't matter if they were flesh and blood, iron and plastic, or crystal and steel...

For the first time, Jamie wondered if he had ever been told the truth; by his family, by his countrymen, or by the old alien traveller who pretended so well that he was human himself. Maybe he was just being trained to hate, to fight; To focus, as he did now. Maybe one day he would ask.

Now though, he reached down into the darkness, and curled his hand around metal, crystal, and stranger, softer things. He twisted and wrenched. Maybe somewhere in his mind he heard the dying screams of something that had never lived.

what do you believe in, jamie mccrimmon?

'I have to believe something,' he said, as the light began to fade.

He opened his eyes again. It was now dark. He had been there for hours, he realised. Talking with the wetware. Disabling the bomb.

The Doctor was standing beside him. 'Well done, Jamie,' he said quietly. 'Thank you.'

Together, they walked away.

Changing Rooms
(With No Doors)

by Mark Michalowski

'Hello! I'm Carol Smillie, and welcome to *Changing Rooms*!'

The frighteningly cheerful TV presenter froze, her face held in a struggling, broad grin, like a pinned butterfly. All around her, the *Changing Rooms* crew threw puzzled glances at each other, checking the script, wondering if Carol had simply forgotten her next line.

But as a creaking, grinding sound filled the air around them, all heads turned to see what the increasingly wide-eyed Carol was staring at. Behind them, out of nowhere, and sitting incongruously at the side of the catering truck, was a large, blue box. The flashing light on its roof fell dark.

'Bloody hell…,' whispered Carol.

'Fabulous,' said Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen, who'd stepped out of his trailer to see what the noise had been.

'That's really, really good,' added Linda Barker, the other designer on the team, her mouth half full of chips from the catering truck. 'What is it?'

They all crowded around the box, Laurence reaching out a frilly-cuffed hand to touch the TARDIS' rough, blue surface.

'This is just *so* retro,' he said in awe – and then leaped back, along with everyone else, as the door opened and a head of blond curls poked out, eyes blazing beneath the ragged fringe.

'If you've brought me here to perform as your dancing bear,' he growled ominously, 'then you've picked the wrong person. Now, if you'll let the TARDIS go, we'll be on our way and say no more about it.'

He was met by silence and blank looks. Half the crew wondered if this was part of the show, until they saw that the camera and sound people were as dumbfounded by the box and its occupant as they were. They looked back at Carol, who was fingering her earpiece, frowning.

'Apparently,' she said slowly and cautiously, 'the Gods of Light Entertainment have decreed that the Doctor and his companions should perform for them.'

'The what?' asked Linda, finishing the last of her chips off. Carol shrugged.

'That's what the voice said.'

'Whose voice?'

'Dunno – weird, echoey.' She frowned. 'Is this a wind-up?'

'I assume that this is some kind of a joke' said the Doctor, looking Laurence up and down. 'You're not a future me, are you?' He raised his eyebrow archly, taking in the frilly-cuffed shirt, the long, Bohemian hair which trailed across Laurence's shoulders, and the elegant suit, which looked as though it had been made out of a pair of chintz curtains.

The designer, in turn, looked the Doctor up and down.

'I do hope not,' he said drily. 'Although if your taste in interior design matches your dress sense, then whatever we do can only be an improvement.'

'What?' roared the Doctor, looking down at his multicoloured coat, stretching out his arms like a courting peacock. 'At least my clothes show some… some… originality!'

'Calm down Doctor,' said Peri, patting him patronisingly on the shoulder. 'He's only trying to wind you up.'

'And succeeding,' muttered the stranger under his breath. He gave a sigh and turned back to the woman standing expectantly behind him. 'This one's mine, is it Carol?' he asked.

''Fraid so, Laurence,' Carol shrugged apologetically. 'Linda Barker's got the other one.' She jerked her head in the direction of the other little group that had formed, about twenty feet away, outside an

apparently identical blue box to the one in front of which Laurence and the blond man stood.

Linda Barker was trying to hold a conversation with a short, puckish-looking man without making it obvious that she was actually trying to get a good look at the legs of the man's young, kilted companion – who'd introduced himself as Jamie and was surprisingly nervous of the cameras, the sound equipment and all the people faffing about in anoraks with clipboards.

'Can't we just get back in the TARDIS and go, Doctor?' he whispered to the little man, jerking his head in the direction of the blue box from which they had just emerged.

'I'm afraid not, Jamie,' said the Doctor with an apologetic smile. 'Whoever's brought us here has trapped the TARDIS – well, the TARDISes- ' he gestured at his the man who, distressingly, he knew to be one of his future incarnations, still squabbling with the dandy in the floral suit '-in some sort of energy field. Until we find out who it is and what they want, we're not going anywhere.'

Jamie gave a grumpy sigh.

'So what's going on here? What are all these people doing?'

'We're actually trying to make a television programme, luvvies,' flounced a short, balding man with a set of headphones on, peevishly, 'so can we get on with it?'

'D'you hear that, Jamie? A television programme.' The Doctor rubbed his hands together. 'D'you mind if we watch?'

'Watch?' laughed Linda. 'You're *in* it!'

'So what is this television programme about, exactly?' asked the second Doctor, watching the foppish man in the three-piece suite remonstrating with his future self.

'Hmm?,' said Linda, sharing the last of her chips with Jamie who was beginning to warm to this whole thing. If the truth be known, he was actually rather enjoying the attention, although he drew the line at letting the makeup man powder his face like some wee girlie. 'I'm surprised you haven't been told. You did write in to the programme to come on *Changing Rooms*, didn't you?'

The Doctor looked evasive, casting his eyes around. 'Think of us as last-minute draftees,' he said. 'These Gods of Light Entertainment that your friend mentioned, I suspect, are a group of entities that have been, shall we say, trying to pin me down for a while.'

'Aye,' agreed Jamie, 'and it looks like they've pinned you down good and proper this time.'

'Well…' Linda said doubtfully, wondering, for the first time, what rooms she and Laurence were supposed to be doing makeovers on. Everyone had thought it rather odd that they'd been sent out into a gravel pit in Surrey for the filming of the programme, and told that this week's "victims" would be along soon. 'We take two sets of people, swap them over, and they get to redecorate a room in each others' houses. With the help of a couple of rather talented designers, that is,' she added with a twinkle.

'Aye, and where would they be, then?'

Linda pulled a sour little face at him and smiled. 'There's me, Linda Barker, and that's Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen over there – the God of Interiors. So his press release says.'

Jamie grimaced. 'That big jessie with the hair?' He gave a snort. 'Can we have you?'

Linda opened her mouth to pant 'yesyesyes' but Carol, the show's ever-smiling, ever-Scottish host came over, pulling her anorak tight around her, breathing out thick gouts of steam in the chilly air.

'How are we getting on then?' she asked Linda.

'Another Scot!' exclaimed Jamie in surprise at Carol's accent. She beamed her most gorgeous smile at him, and Linda's face froze. Smillie was trying to steal her man. Again. With forced cheeriness, Linda introduced Carol, and the Doctor introduced himself and Jamie. The two women were a little puzzled at the Doctor's insistence that 'the Doctor' was his full name, but went along with it in the same spirit that this whole bizarre episode seemed to demand.

'So what are we supposed to be making over for you, then?' asked Carol.

'Haven't the Gods of Light Entertainment told you?' asked the Doctor impishly, glancing at the curly wire on Carol's neck, leading to her earpiece.

'I'm not getting anything from them at the moment. Probably just a glitch.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at Jamie and gave a knowing nod.

'I imagine they'll be back when they have something to tell us,' he said. 'But as for what you're

making over – as you put it – for us… I would imagine that it's the TARDIS.'

Carol frowned and glanced at Linda, who threw back an equally uncomprehending shrug.

'This,' said the Doctor, waving expansively at the police box behind him.

'Oh, right,' Carol said, looking over to where Laurence and the curly-haired man were being held apart by the American girl, seemingly on the point of having a fist-fight in front of the other police box. This was a first!

'I'll let you have a chat about it,' Carol said. 'We don't seem to have any notes on what you want us to do to it, so we'll need to get that sorted first.'

To the sixth Doctor's chagrin, Laurence didn't bother with the old bigger-inside-than-outside business when he stepped into the second Doctor's TARDIS' console room. He just stood, hands on hips, one eyebrow raised archly as he stared around.

'It's very… white, isn't it?' he finally said with a tiny sigh that – fortunately – only Peri seemed to hear.

'Well I have been busy, you know,' bristled the Doctor. 'Saving the universe from evil, toppling dictators, clearing out the rubbish of the cosmos… that sort of thing. And anyway, this isn't actually *my* TARDIS. It's my former incarnation's. Mine is *much* nicer.'

Laurence crossed to the back wall and crouched down at the foot of the roundels. 'It seems someone already had a go at *trompe l'oeil*,' he said, tugging at the bottom edge of what Peri now realised was just a very large photocopy of roundels, pasted onto the wall. With a wrinkle in it.

'So,' he stood up and whirled around. 'Any ideas?'

The Doctor's face creased up with concentration as he paced around the console room, noticing how much tattier and more *amateur* it was than he remembered. Obviously, over the years, the TARDIS had taken it upon itself to perform some subtle redecoration when his back had been turned. Not only were the roundels on the walls little more than photocopied pictures of the real thing, but the console seemed tackier – as if it had been designed to be viewed with much less discerning, and more forgiving, eyes than his own TARDIS did.

'Doctor,' warned Peri, knowing even as she asked the question that he'd have some clever answer, 'seeing as this is actually your TARDIS from years ago, if you do anything to it, won't you remember having had it done in the past?'

True to form, the Doctor gave his most patronising smile.

'I suspect, Peri, that we've been taken out of time somehow. By these Gods of Light Entertainment – who, I also suspect – I've met in a different guise in the past. It may be one of those little plot inconsistencies that seem to dog me whenever I meet up with previous – or future – incarnations.'

Peri nodded knowingly (as if!) and glanced over at Laurence who was ignoring their conversation, fiddling around with the console. Alarmed, the Doctor rushed over and slapped his hands away.

'I really wouldn't do that if I were you,' he said. 'I can't remember whether I had the control isomorphism switched on all those years ago, and I'd hate for you to send us spiralling into a black hole.'

A look of dawning inspiration crossed Laurence's face.

'Black!' he said in a hushed voice. 'Yes, black.' He looked round, ignoring the frown on the Doctor's face. 'The perfect antithesis of all this sterile white.'

Laurence began to pace around the console room, hands out, fingers spread wide as he began to paint a verbal picture of what he envisaged, weaving an almost palpable new reality out of the air with deft gestures and balletic movements.

'Shades of black – charcoal, ebony, jet… black holes. Perhaps with a just a sparkling of Hawking radiation to take the severity off it.' He turned sharply to the Doctor and Peri, his face alive and expectant. 'Well…?'

'Isn't it a bit, um, dreary?' asked Peri.

'Exactly!' jumped in the Doctor. 'I mean, look at me. Hardly a man known for his funereal dress sense, am I?'

'But it's not your TARDIS anyway, is it? It's your second incarnation's.' Laurence's eyes returned, almost sadly, to the pasted on pictures of roundels. 'And it would help disguise that, wouldn't it?'

The Doctor gave a sigh and looked at Peri.

'Don't look at me,' she said, folding her arms. 'If you ask me, he'll be furious. It's the worst possible colour scheme you could choose.'

Handy Andy, the team's cheeky-chappy cockney handyman stood, mouth open, aghast at the jet-black room. Laurence was wittering on about shades of anthracite and soot and Indian ink, but all Andy could see was black.

'Bloody hell, Florence, you've outdone yourself this time,' he said.

'Coming from you,' said Laurence, witheringly, flicking his lacy cuffs back and checking for paint spots, 'I'll take that as a compliment.'

'I wouldn't go that far, mate. Anyway, what's the plan?'

Laurence raised an eyebrow and smiled, suddenly far darker and more sinister than he'd been 'til now – even outdoing the satanic looks he'd thrown at the Doctor when he'd suggested that Laurence's clothes owed more to Laura Ashley than to Regency.

'The plan? Quite simple, my dear Andrew – we steal the TARDIS and get off this god-forsaken, style-starved little planet.'

In the other TARDIS, Linda Barker had had quite a job convincing the second Doctor that they should do any decorating at all.

'Linda, Linda,' said the Doctor, clasping his hands together and adopting his most patient expression. 'Something dark and evil is going on here – can't you feel it? Something beyond all this painting and stencilling – very nice though it is. 'He cast a brief glance at the frieze of Greek patterns that they'd spent the best part of two hours stencilling around the walls of the console room. For some reason, Linda had been most insistent that Jamie had ascended the ladder to apply the paint, whilst she'd stayed at the bottom 'to keep it steady'.

'To be quite honest,' Linda said, 'no I can't. And we've only got a few hours left to finish this, so I think we really, really should crack on. This Atlantean theme is going to look fabulous when it's finished.'

'I think you've done enough cracking,' Jamie commented dourly, warily eyeing the TARDIS console which Linda had insisted would look 'really, really good' when covered with a mosaic made up of bits of broken tiles. She hadn't been able to find any tiles, but she had found an old cloth bag full of marble chippings which had been almost as good. It was only when she discovered the remains of two marble hands at the bottom of the bag that she realised that it had been stuffed into a brass-bound wooden chest at the back of a store-room - and she began to wonder whether the bag's contents weren't the embarrassing results of an accident that the Doctor had tried, unsuccessfully, to cover up. In fact, the more she'd looked at the fragments, the more they'd brought to mind a certain, rather famous, statue.

'Oh cheer up, you misery guts,' she said. 'It's almost finished.'

The Doctor glanced up at the frieze which was almost complete.

'Yes, it is rather. I imagine zat nuzzink in ze vorld can stop you now.' He gave a wry little smile. 'Well you two can carry on,' said the Doctor, heading for the door. 'This mystery has gone on quite long enough, and it's about time I got to the bottom of it.'

'Just what I was thinking,' muttered Linda lasciviously, as, at her insistence, Jamie began to climb the ladder again.

Outside the TARDIS, various sound and camera people were getting annoyed about how the TARDISes were interfering with their equipment. Carol Smillie breezed past, stopping only to ask the Doctor how it was going, before heading off to the catering truck for a stiff whisky to ward off the seemingly ever-present gravel-pit chill..

'Chance would be a fine thing,' said the Doctor, as he began a surreptitious shuffle towards the other TARDIS. *His* TARDIS. He'd had it patiently explained to him that, until the transformations were complete, the two Doctors weren't allowed to go back to their own ships. But it was worry, not curiosity, that prompted him to grab a huge fluorescent orange anorak from the back of a chair, swaddle himself up in it, and begin to edge his way towards the TARDIS.

Inside, Peri was putting the finishing touches to their midnight colour scheme. The Doctor had disappe[illegible] looking for 'something more suitable for decorating in', having

thrown a hissy fit when he'd discovered a spot of black paint on his coat tails. Painting the console had been the hardest part – especially since Laurence had insisted that all the buttons, switches and levers should be painted black, too.

'Always been a dark 'orse,' said Andy, conspiratorially, chuckling at his own joke, as they'd watched Laurence fiddling with the console. Peri's fears that Laurence's tampering would have them floating out in space in minutes had been allayed when the Doctor had checked the controls and had discovered that the second Doctor ('always more of a worrier than me') had, indeed, set the isomorphic controls. Only the Doctor – the *other* Doctor – could operate them, or disconnect the isomorphic circuits.

'There!' said Laurence proudly, standing back from the console, tiny artist's paintbrush in hand. 'That's that finished!'

He glanced back at Andy and Peri.

'Well? Don't just gawp – what d'you think?'

'It's very nice,' Peri said falteringly. 'Very, er, understated.'

'And I haven't 'ad to make a single thing out of bleedin' MDF either,' Andy added.

'Yes,' said Laurence thoughtfully. 'I did think of getting you to rustle up an MDF Louis Quinze armoire to stand over there – but the real thing would be so much better, don't you think?'

Peri gave a laugh. 'Well, if you asked the Doctor nicely, I'm sure he'd consider taking you for a quick trip back to, um, back to then.'

'Ask the Doctor?' Laurence said coldly, his voice suddenly taking on a most unpleasant – and familiar – sneer. '*Ask* the Doctor? Really, Miss Brown, you should know me better than that by now.'

Peri frowned, feeling a sudden memory drag its chill fingertips down her spine. She turned to Andy – who was suddenly holding his hammer. But not in the usual way. He was pointing at her. As she backed away, sudden realisation dawning, Andy's fingers tightened on the handle and a wave of thick, glutinous blackness enveloped her, like viscous ebony paint. And as the world was sucked away, all she could hear was Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen's maniac laughter, echoing through the tunnels in her head.

Outside the TARDIS, the Doctor was pretending to be cleaning the windows, hoping no one would collar him and ask him what he was doing. Shiftily glancing around, he pushed open the door and slipped inside.

'Oh my giddy aunt!' he exclaimed, appalled at the 'coal mine in a power cut' effect that his future self and Laurence had wrought on his poor little space-time machine. And, hunched over the equally black console, was Laurence himself, chuckling in a most undesignerish way. He appeared to be showing something to Andy, his handyman assistant.

As the Doctor raised a tentative hand and prepared a discreet cough, he heard a low, pained moaning from somewhere at floor level, down to his left. Peri lay there, sprawled on her back, her head flopping to and fro as she muttered to herself.

'Oh dear,' said the Doctor, as Laurence, too, heard Peri's whimpers and turned.

'Doctor!' Laurence raised an eyebrow and slowly cast a benign look at the supine American. 'Your assistant – ah, future assistant – had something of a dizzy turn and we thought it best to let her have a lie down.'

'Um,' said the Doctor, sensing something in the designer's mien darker than the ghastly paintjob he'd performed on his beloved ship. He knelt down beside Peri and lifted her head as she opened her eyes.

'Doctor... where's the other one, the other Doctor?'

As she caught sight of the advancing Laurence over the Doctor's shoulder, her eyes widened in fear and her hands scrabbled at the floor as she tried to push herself upright. At that moment, the TARDIS' external door swung open and Jamie shot in, breathless.

'Doctor! They're goin' spare out there. Someone saw you come in here and they're getting a wee bit narky about it. I think that Scots lassie's on the warpath.'

'Jamie, I really don't think that-'

The Doctor stopped as he saw the expression on Jamie's face and turned to see Laurence stalking towards them, a hammer held strangely in his hand as if it were some sort of projectile weapon. Behind him, Andy's usually cheerful grin had taken on something of a malicious gleam. The Doctor rose to his

feet, helping a still-dazed Peri up.

Then he turned to Laurence, and for the first time he saw something unsettlingly familiar in the saturnine features.

'It's not... it can't be... Koschei?'

Laurence tossed his head back in a contemptuous gesture.

'Koschei is dead, Doctor, as I seem to remember telling you. On several occasions.'

'Still using that ridiculous "Master" are you?' The Doctor gave a disapproving tut.

'No more ridiculous than "Doctor" – or have you finally decided to revert to-'

The Doctor cut him off with a peremptory wave of the hand – just as the interior door opened and the sixth Doctor came rushing in, only to skid across the polished black floor at the sight of the tableau before him. The Master waved the hammer at him, indicating that he should join his companions and his earlier self on the other side of the room.

'Am I interrupting something?' he asked politely. 'I can always come back later if I am...' His voice tailed away lamely as he saw the glowering expression on his earlier self's face, and the pain in Peri's eyes as she rubbed her temples.

'He's the Master,' Peri said darkly.

'Laurence? Surely not!'

The second Doctor nodded regretfully. The sixth Doctor turned on his heel and dug his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, an air of expectant weariness about him.

'So what's all this ludicrosity in aid of, then? I take it you don't redecorate people's houses just for the fun of it. An excuse to go rummaging through their drawers in search of bit of family silver to steal, is it? Or maybe you just love playing to the cameras? Always were a bit of an old ham, weren't you?'

'You think I go through this ridiculous charade every few weeks for fun, do you? Traipsing in and out of tacky houses, having to deal with their equally tacky occupants; biting my tongue at their inane outpourings, having to smile nicely when they say they prefer beige – beige! I ask you!.'

'He's starting to rant, isn't he?' whispered Peri.

'Bad sign,' replied the second Doctor worriedly.

'How can you possibly imagine the torment I've suffered!' screamed the Master, brandishing Andy's sonic hammer. 'Marooned on this tasteless, shabby planet with only my fabulous sense of style to make it at all bearable.'

'And me,' added Andy, somewhat hurt. The Master threw him a look.

'Well I must say, you may be better dressed than the one I met,' said Peri frostily, 'but you're still the same self-obsessed, ranting ego-maniac that you always were!'

The second Doctor applauded as his future self galloped on.

'So you set up all of this – the fake Gods of Light Entertainment, the whole *Changing Rooms* TV programme-'

'And the BBC,' Andy interjected.

'-*and* the BBC? – just to get hold of my TARDIS to escape Earth?'

'I think you'll find it's *my* TARDIS,' commented the second Doctor quietly.

'*Our* TARDIS then. I knew you were into convoluted schemes – especially after that ludicrous affair with the Magna Carta – but isn't this pushing it a bit?'

The Master flicked his hair back and picked a speck of dirt from the sleeve of his jacket. He'd somehow managed to change into a blood-red velvet suit and a black, frill-fronted shirt.

'We don't all have working TARDISes to go gallivanting around the universe whenever we choose, you know.'

'So what, exactly, happened to yours?' asked the fifth Doctor.

The Master scowled and threw another black look at a suddenly sheepish Andy. 'Some mix up with a power saw and the main dimensional stabiliser if you must know. But that's not important now.' He swirled around and pointed the sonic hammer at the two Doctors and their hapless companions. 'Now, if you don't mind, I think it's time for us to part company – lovely though it's been to spend this quality time with you all.'

He gestured towards the door.

'So you're not going to kill us then?' asked Peri defiantly, feeling her voice tremble just a little. She was damned if she was going to troop out of the TARDIS at this dandy's insistence. 'Or torture us

sadistically until we beg for mercy?'

The Master cackled.

'Miss Brown, have our encounters taught you nothing about me at all? All that moustache-twirling and those pointless threats are just *so passé*. Surely by now you know that I'm not your usual pantomime villain.'

Peri struggled against shouting out 'Oh yes you are!', but his raised eyebrow suggested that any more lip from her might be met with something rather more fatal than a smart answer and a flick of the hair.

'Come on Peri,' said her Doctor gently, turning to face her – and so that his back was to the smugly-grinning Master and his henchman. Almost silently, he mouthed to his earlier self, to Jamie and to Peri: 'Cover your eyes – now!'

Wondering what was going on – but suspecting a cunning, last-minute plan – they all did exactly that.

And seconds later, they heard an anguished howl from the Master.

'No! No!' he shrieked.

Against her better judgement, Peri opened one of her eyes a crack and dared to peek. What she saw chilled her, and for a moment, she almost felt pity for the Master – who'd sunk to his knees and was moaning, tearing at his hair.

The TARDIS had transformed itself.

Instead of the black-on-black motif – which, now she thought about it, should really have rung a warning bell or two - the TARDIS had become what the Master – what Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen, God of Interiors – despised the most.

Mediocre.

Instead of smooth, jet-black walls there were acres of woodchip wallpaper, painted a dull, hospital green. At waist height, a paper border of tastefully drawn flowers ran around the room, below which was a very nice striped wallpaper in two darker shades of green. The console itself had transformed itself from a sinister black monolith into a teak-veneered coffee table with a tiled surface.

As the second opened his eyes and winced at the sight, Peri heard Andy whisper 'Bleedin' 'ell Florence! Wot they done?' Jamie deftly stepped forward and snatched the sonic hammer from the floor where it had fallen from the Master's fingers. The broken figure in red velvet looked up at the sixth Doctor and ran his fingers, miserably, back through his hair.

'How could you?' he whispered pitifully. 'All my beautiful work....'

'Well that was a matter of opinion. You gave yourself away, you know.'

'What?' the Master said, sneering again and regaining some of his earlier composure. 'With my unerring sense of style?'

'No, with the fact that you weren't at all fazed by the TARDIS' dimensional transcendentality. And by the fact that you knew what Hawking radiation was.'

Peri was almost sure she heard the Master say 'Curses! Foiled again!' – but she might have imagined it.

But the Doctor wasn't finished. He strutted around in front of the Master, intent on explaining just how clever he'd been. 'So when I was off inside the TARDIS, I fiddled around with the block transfer computation circuits, and set this up, just in case.' He gestured beneficently around the room. The Master winced and had to avert his eyes. Almost as an afterthought, the Doctor reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny remote control unit. He examined it for a few seconds, beaming at his own cleverness, and tossed it to the second Doctor.

As if on cue, the external doors opened, and Linda Barker entered – in full army gear – with a squad of UNIT troops.

'Ah, Colonel Barker!' the Doctor beamed. 'Perfect timing. All those months of undercover work have paid off, eh? Good job when I came along when I did.'

She nodded. 'Although if you'd turned up earlier, we could have saved countless families untold misery. Sergeant Potter – cuff him!' She stood aside as Potter shuffled nervously forwards and did the honours.

'I've got a spare set, by the way,' she whispered in an aside to Jamie, as the Master was jerked to his feet, cuffed and led away, snarling as he passed the Doctors. Andy followed him – looking more

like a sad puppy running after its owner than the captured henchman of a galactic supercriminal.

The Master paused in front of the second Doctor and leaned in close, and almost pleading look on his face.

'You did like it though, didn't you?'

The second Doctor shot a glance at the sixth.

'Black and white were always my favourites,' he said gently, and the look of relief on his arch-enemy's face was almost touching. Colonel Barker jabbed him with the barrel of her pistol, and, head hung low, the Master left the TARDIS.

The sixth Doctor beamed at his earlier self and his two companions.

'Now that that's all sorted, I think it's time we were going, don't you Peri?'

'Um,' interjected the second Doctor, almost apologetically. 'Before you go, old chap, do you think you could so something about this?' He waved at the room around them. 'I mean, the black I could just about have lived with, but this bears more than a disturbing resemblance to the lounge in a retirement home.'

'Of course – pass me the remote control will you?'

But as the second Doctor vainly searched his capacious pockets for the device, the room around them shimmered – and they were faced with a dozen or so external doors, arranged neatly and symmetrically around the now-circular control room.

'The Master!' moaned Peri in exasperation, turning to the second Doctor. 'He must have picked your pocket on the way out.'

'Come on,' he said, reaching running to the console – which, in the transformation, had reverted to its usual form - only to discover a dozen or so red-knobbed door controls. He began trying them at random, until, finally, one of the doors opened. The four of them ran out to find Colonel Barker and her UNIT troops in a dazed heap, just a few yards from the sixth Doctor's TARDIS.

'Wha' happened?' asked Jamie, shaking Linda gently.

'Paint fumes,' she murmured languorously, gripping Jamie's arm and staring into his eyes, before sinking into a deep sleep.

The silence was broken by the sound of the TARDIS in front of them beginning its dematerialisation. As it faded, it's outer surface shimmered and rippled – to be replaced with that of a large, red-framed screen with a zebra-print panel in the centre.

'Oh no,' moaned the sixth Doctor.

'He's escaped again,' said Peri, grabbing his elbow and watching as the TARDIS faded from view. 'More trouble for the universe.'

'Worse than that,' the Doctor said. 'He's turned my TARDIS into something out of a whore's boudoir!'

Author's note: this is an adaptation of a story intended to start a new run of Doctor Who. The BBC, in its infinite wisdom, had realised that 'crossover TV' was the way to go, and had decided that Doctor Who was to be the flagship of their new autumn season, with this adventure beginning what was unofficially called The Key to Style season. The two Doctors and their companions were set for a 26-week run of chasing the Llewellyn-Bowen Master across the galaxy, encountering such foul fiends as the evil and deranged botanist, 'Professor' Titchmarsh - ably assisted by the alien Dimmocks; battling against the sinister Two Fat Ladies; and meeting up with Tegan again in Heathrow airport whilst avoiding press photographers and camp airline staff.

Sadly, for reasons never fully explained, this never happened.

What does it profit a man?

by Arfie Mansfield

February 1998:

Warwick pressed himself against the wall, tensing every muscle in his body as the beam moved by, inches away from him. Once it had passed, he checked the map Seeley had given him to identify the next blind spot. He was discouraged by what he found. The security in and around the compound was the most advanced the state had - there were very few oversights in the system, but those that there were had been accurately noted over years of careful observation. Between Warwick and his objective there was only one more blind spot, and he would only have one chance to cover the five hundred yards that separated him from it.

The beam that had been between his current position and the next blind spot moved out of the way, giving him a clear passage to it. Without bothering to check his watch or to look for guards, he ran.

October 1976:

Seeley stared in horror as, with a drawn-out screech, a somewhat battered-looking police box appeared in the clearing ahead of him. To anyone who had not witnessed its arrival it would have seemed merely bizarre in its tree-lined surroundings, almost laughable, but to Seeley it was terrifying. He stood rooted to the spot for a while, until the door of the police box opened, and a man stepped out, holding onto it for support. For a moment, it looked as if he was about to collapse, but he fought it off, and forced himself to stand unaided; a triumph of willpower. He looked around at his surroundings, before spying Seeley. The man's gaze chilled Seeley to the bone and returned his ability to move his legs, something for which he was eternally grateful.

February 1998:

Warwick waited for the guard to return to the guardhouse, glancing at his watch. He thanked the guard for his punctuality under his breath as he ran for the compound's inner gate. Before he had even reached it, he unshouldered his bag and took a small beige box out of one of its pockets, unreeling two leads from its side, ready to attach them to either end of the passcard slot in the gate's control pad.

Once he had inserted the leads, he quickly moved into a corner and inserted an earphone into his ear, attaching the other end of the wire to the box. He glanced at his watch again - he had just over three minutes to get past the gate and over to the nearest building, but he still felt exposed. He looked around nervously, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He put his hand to his ear, unconsciously checking that the earphone was still there, even though he could still feel it.

November 1976:

'Surely someone has a knife?' the Doctor asked the assembled group of humans and reptiles, 'We can't stop the greatest scientific experiment in Earth's history through not having a knife between us!'

Eventually, the Brigadier produced a penknife from his pocket, somewhat reluctantly. The Doctor took it from him and in one fluid movement, he reached behind the nearest reptile and thrust the knife into its back, shattering bone and tearing through its flesh. It emitted a roar of agony and rage, its third eye blazing with more ferocity than ever before.

The Doctor spun it around to face its stunned compatriots, the energy from its eye tearing through their brains before they could even attempt to retaliate. After much ineffectual flailing about, the reptile sporting a knife from its back collapsed, all three eyes staring blankly across the floor towards the others.

February 1998:

There came a muted tone from the earphone, signalling that the box had done its job. Warwick removed the wires from the slot and quickly shoved the box back into his bag. Checking to ensure there were no guards around, he carefully slid the gate open enough for him to slip through, and pulled it back into place behind him. He winced at the click it made as the lock re-engaged, quiet as it was.

Without a moment's delay he ran to the nearest building. Within seconds of ducking into the doorway, he saw a trooper coming out of the guardhouse. He held his breath, not moving a muscle, not even to indulge his nervous habit of checking his watch. Even without it he knew that if the guard did not soon get a move on and move to where he could not see Warwick, a beam would sweep over his hiding place and set off every klaxon and alarm in the compound. The guard seemed to be walking excruciatingly slowly, and he could see the beam inching closer to the doorway.

November 1976:

'Move along, you lot!' the Brigadier ordered the assembled press, 'This is a highly dangerous military situation, and we cannot afford to have civilians anywhere near the exclusion zone.'

The baying crowd of journalists were reluctant to leave, but given the amount of weaponry being wielded by the soldiers at the roadblock, and the reason for their investigation, a mysterious explosion, none wanted to risk the consequences of staying. As they prepared to leave, a figure pulled up on the other side of the roadblock in a ridiculous-looking yellow car. He got out and spoke briefly to the Brigadier, before turning to the journalists.

'Ladies and gentlemen of the press,' he called out to them, 'I have something very important to tell you all.' He waited while they hastily reassembled the equipment they had been dismantling. Once he was sure that all cameras and microphones were set up, he began; 'I am the Doctor, and you will obey me...'

February 1998:

As soon as the guard had disappeared around a corner, and Warwick was satisfied that he was out of earshot, he pushed himself quickly out of the doorway. A beam swept past where he had been standing moments earlier. He ran for the central laboratory building, keeping as low as possible. His eyes scanned the terrain professionally as he burst through open areas between buildings to ensure there were no guards. Suddenly he heard a footfall from around a corner ahead. The only potential cover he could see was another doorway, so he ran to it.

"*Shit, shit, SHIT,*" he thought. He was in an unfamiliar area, and had no idea when the next beam would sweep past, and was not in a position to check through Seeley's notes to find out. To one side, he could see the silhouette of the guard he had heard turning the corner, heading towards his hiding-place.

May 1979:

The Master sat in the bare concrete cell, barely able to contain his rage. After all he had done to help the Doctor, the duplicitous bastard had double-crossed him. There was a noise, and the door opened, He stared up at eye-level, preparing to use the unexpected opportunity to hypnotise the guard.

'I am...' he managed, before seeing who it was.

'...Not getting out of here that easily,' the Doctor finished, sneering, 'I think we had better do something about you trying to influence your guards like that. We can't have you escaping now, can we?'

The Master glared up at him, and was surprised to see him smiling.

The guard assigned to the Master's cell tried to ignore the screams coming from within, but it was impossible to do so. He was more than slightly disturbed by it. Aside from the fact that screams of

agony and horror tend not to be the most reassuring of things, he, along with every other person who had spent any considerable time in the presence of the Master before his arrest, knew that he was not the type who indulged in screaming. If he was in pain, he would just take it, but this... it was sickening.

The Doctor stepped out of the cell, but the screaming continued unabated. He ordered the soldier to close the door. Only after he had done so did he see why the Doctor had been unable to do it himself. In his right hand, he held a lighter, while in the left, he held what were barely recognisable as...

'You needn't worry about him hypnotising you anymore; he's no longer capable of it.' the Doctor reassured him, somewhat redundantly.

February 1998:

The figure approaching Warwick stopped and reached into his pocket. Warwick tensed, preparing to run, but what the figure pulled out did not appear to be a weapon. Despite himself, Warwick leaned forward slightly to see what it was. It appeared to be some sort of electronic device, like a communication device of some sort. Before he could deduce anything further, the figure pressed a button on the device, and the immediate area was flooded with bright light from halogen lamps arranged along the edge of the roof of the building by which he had been hiding and the one opposite, lighting the whole alley between.

Warwick's eyes were still adjusting to the sudden light as the figure spoke. 'Oh, well done.' he spat, 'You've done rather well at evading our security systems, haven't you?' The voice hardened. 'However, your aptitude at sneaking about doesn't seem to stretch as far as avoiding cameras.'

Warwick's stomach sank. 'Shit.' he breathed.

March 1991:

'The headlines tonight:

'Fifty-eight protesters were killed today when government forces crushed an uprising by the Free British Army this morning. The FBA were reacting to the Doctor's recent announcement that he is not content with ruling the country while not being nominally head of state, and his decision to have the queen executed, rather than merely excommunicated, in order to rectify the situation.

'The Chief of Security issued the following statement earlier this evening;

'"These dissidents must be taught that such protests as these are unacceptable. The government will not sway to the ludicrous demands of these hooligans. If they persist in being of detriment to society, we shall persist in eradicating them. I have nothing further to add."

'This follows a similar incident last month when over two hundred protesters were killed outside the government research compound near Maidstone when the protest there was also quelled by force.

'In America, President Bruce today denied allegations of corruption over an incident involving...'

February 1998:

Lethbridge-Stewart, responsible for the National Security of Britain, and more specifically, the compound, grabbed Warwick by the collar and hurled him out of the doorway, throwing him to the ground. Warwick attempted to stand, but Lethbridge-Stewart kicked his feet from beneath him.

'I wouldn't advise trying to escape. I may be old, but I'm perfectly capable of killing you.' He kicked Warwick hard in the stomach, "Now, what do you have in that bag of yours?'

September 1994:

The Doctor sighed - after almost fifteen years of continual alien invasion attempts, not one race had possessed time travel technology, or at least not that he could utilise. He had been able to draw attention to this backwater gaol-world he found himself a prisoner of, but he could not influence the quality of extraterrestrial would-be-conquerors that answered the beacon. The Istavrotids had seemed promising, but unfortunately it was not to be. However, progress was being made with the work on the TARDIS,

and it would only be a matter of time before it yielded results...

February 1998:

'I have to admit, I'm rather impressed at what you've got here.'

December 1997:

'I hope you understand the importance of this, David.' Seeley warned him. 'That bloody compound *must* be destroyed. I know what that bastard's got in there. 'Course, it's not as important as killing him, but the FBA are working on that.'

'What actually *does* he have in there?' Warwick asked.

'It's some kind of teleporting machine - I don't know any other details, but its been disguised to look like an old police box. It seems to be very important to him, but it's broken, and he doesn't seem to know how to fix it. Without it, he's up shit creek.'

'I see,' he paused, 'what's a "police box"?'

'It's like a phone box, but blue. I'll try and find a picture of one if you like, but I doubt you'll have much trouble recognising it.' Seeley handed him a rucksack. 'You'll need this lot to get in. There's a map, my notes on the security system. They're bloody important, by the way. Read them as soon as possible. A couple of lock-opening gadgets knocked up by a friend of mine in the FBA. Don't ask me how they work; get in touch with the bloke I told you about; and enough explosives to blow the whole place to kingdom come. Oh, and you'll have to ask the same bloke about the explosives. They're not my field either.'

'What actually *is* your field?'

'It used to be poaching,' Seeley grinned, 'but I've branched out recently.'

February 1998:

Lethbridge-Stewart collapsed as Warwick thrust a knife into his leg. He had not been paying him enough attention, being far too absorbed with the contents of the bag. Warwick then thrust the knife into his eye to shut him up, and hauled the bag onto his shoulder.

He ran for a short distance, away from the lights and the corpse. He could hear guards shouting; moving closer to where Lethbridge-Stewart had confronted him. He removed his bag and emptied the contents onto a doorstep. He primed the explosives, setting the timer for two minutes. And then, once more, he ran.

December 1997:

Seeley typed 'police box' into his computer, and ordered it to go off and search the network for any references to it. An innocent enough request, or so he thought.

Almost immediately, an alert appeared on the screen of a computer not too far away, flagging the operator that someone was looking for information they did not need to know. It was also able to tell them the user's identity and their exact location.

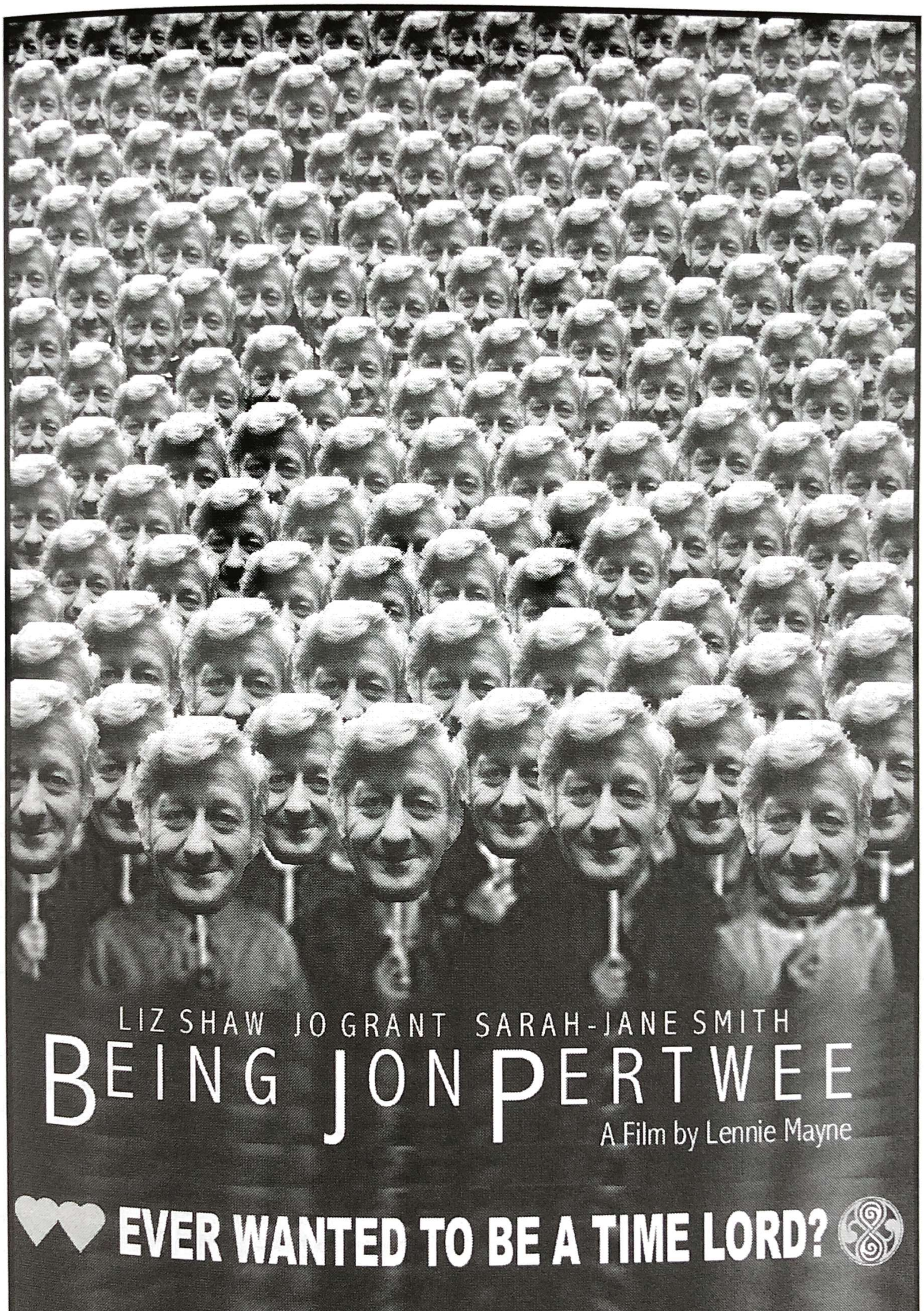
Three minutes later, Seeley met with a fatal accident whilst answering the door.

February 1998:

Warwick made as much noise as possible, trying to divert the guards' attention away from the bomb. He knew he had no chance of escaping with his life, so he might as well ensure his job was carried out, if nothing else. Not exactly the cosiest thought to go through your mind at such a time, but it was better than spending your last few minutes fretting that you had thrown your life away in vain.

'Oi, you fuckwits!' he shouted, 'I'm over here.'

The explosion reached him moments after the guard-dogs did, scouring across the compound in all directions, tearing through building after building as it grew to encompass the main research building, and within it the supposedly indestructible TARDIS. The blast swept straight through the building, shattering its reinforced walls, and leaving nothing alive in its wake. When the smoke cleared, no-one remained to witness whether the bomb had achieved its aim.



Hall of Me

by Mike Collins

He ran his hand through his hair. It was thin now, and grey. That wasn't right. A memory, some distant echo told him there should be more, should be tousled and thick and black. Looking down, his clothes were faded, well worn and neglected…

Who was he?

He'd wandered these streets for hours now. When had he got here? Indeed, where WAS here? He stopped for a moment, looking around trying to get his bearings. Narrow streets, a certain shabbiness to the buildings, none more than three stories tall. Listening, he heard seabirds, and the distant gentle crashing of waves. A fishing village then?

It was dusk: streetlights were coming on, folks walked by clutching coats tightly to trap what warmth they could. Was HE cold?

He had to think about it, but: No. He felt … confused, unfocused. But not cold. Was that strange?

No one paid him any heed as he wandered the backstreets of this fishing village (he'd decided that was right, after all. A 'given' he could construct all other facts upon). He had a sense of where he was heading to, but that purpose wouldn't crystallize in his conscious mind. He settled for knowing when he got there.

A turn now brought him out to the seafront. In the dimming light, the well-used seacraft looked fragile as they rose and fell on the late tide, gently buffeting each other. Had he been here before? He looked at the boats- was one of them his? Had he taken a fall, gotten concussed and ended up wandering like this? Was a brother or a wife, or perhaps grown children about to round a corner in this harbour, embrace him, take him home, restore his faded memories?

That didn't seem right. The thought of family suggested something distant and a pain of regret. A sadness that he barely repressed. He pictured a round face with wide trusting eyes, and a name came to him: Susan.

Who was Susan?

He walked around lobster pots, and crates that had seen better days, his pace picking up now. Wherever he was going he was almost there. Idly, he thought: I wonder what YEAR it is? That thought brought him up short. It was an odd question; one who's asking raised a whole series of other questions. What sort of person didn't even know what year it was?

A man in his late fifties, unshaven and weather-beaten, dressed in worn-out dungarees and an oil slicker nodded hello to him as he passed. He wanted to grab the man by the arm, ask him: Do you know who I am?!

But the unshaven man had turned down an alley towards a bar. Is that where I'm heading? He asked himself? A bar where I'll be recognized, where this fog on my memory will lift? When drinking friends would gather to me, toast my health, and be glad to see their buddy home and safe? That seemed …almost possible. You don't drink, his mind told him. Where do people who don't drink go then?

He walked up past shuttered shop fronts and storehouses, towards a gaslight shining in the gathering evening mist. The light was above a doorway to an old hall. Carved in the stone by the gas lamp was the legend: 'Temporance Hall'.

This, he felt with certainty, was the place.

The door was large and sturdy and he had to shoulder it open. As it creaked round, the sound of music played on an out of tune piano, the noise of a score of conversations layered on top of each other, the warmth from several dozen bodies and lamps on tables and hung from rafters, all hit him. It was a physical sensation and more: he felt …comfortable. Sure that here were the answers he sought.

He sat at an empty table, not far from the door (Did he fear he might need an easy exit? What was

there in his life that made him so cautious?). People at nearby tables nodded to him, as had the man on the sea front. He acknowledged these courtesies but still felt maddeningly.... Distant. Where were his answers then?

"Well, don't YOU look the worse for wear?"

The question startled him- he turned to see a late-middle-aged woman, her grey hair swept up in a style not popular since the 1940s. (Ha! He thought to himself: Maybe it's the 1940s! But that mad thought he quickly dismissed) She wore a large wrap, over a floral two-piece. On the corners of the wrap he noticed an emblem: Was it a hook? It seemed ...familiar.

The woman sat down opposite him, her eyes bearing deep into his own. She relaxed her concentration, her face taking on a sad, understanding look.

"You're lost, aren't you?" she said, patting him on the hand in a motherly way.

"Y-yes." He realized, suddenly, that this was the first word he'd uttered. His voice sounded rough, unused. She attracted the attention of a passing bar-steward.

"A pot of tea. Leaves, not bags. Two mugs, not cups. Milk, not cream. Thank you". She dismissed the man, who disappeared into the throng. She looked at him again.

"What's the first thing you remember?" That intense look was back again, but this time he noticed a keen edge, an inquisitive nature.

"Walking outside, in the village. I was just ...there." He shrugged. That was it, nothing more.

"A regular Kasper Hauser, eh?" she smiled. He tried to pin down her accent- was it British? American? It had a loose, indefinable nature.

"Hauser couldn't speak, though could he?" suddenly he was aware of more: "It was Nuremberg...1828. He appeared, fully grown, but without language or reason..."

He paused.

"How can I remember all that, but not my own name or how I got here?"

She smiled.

"It's never easy is it? That initial trauma?" The bar-steward came with a tray, putting out the mugs, pouring the tea. The woman thanked him, the bar-steward left again.

"What 'trauma'?" He took the tea, drank deep, his throat welcoming the warm infusion.

"This is wonderful."

She smiled again.

"A taste for tea is a legacy from my time in England during the Second World War. For such a harmless seeming drink, it does rather seem addictive. I could never understand why the British were so obsessed with the stuff, but now..." she shook her head. "...It's gotten to me too!"

Something in what she'd said troubled him- was it the timescale? The way she spoke of Britain?

"What year is it?" he asked. She started, thought for a second, then took on that inquisitive look again.

"Why, what year would you LIKE it to be?" Not the answer he expected.

"Who are you?" he asked curious. At this she smiled, an eyebrow raised.

"Well, I've had many names... doesn't do for one to stay too long in a place. In England I was Eglantine Price, nowadays folks just call me Jessica. Any ideas on *your* name?"

He looked at her blankly; trying to mouth a name, but none came.

They sat silently then, sipping tea. He tried to put together what he knew, what he seemed to know and, more importantly, what he had no idea about. This place was warm and comfortable, not as small as it had seemed from the outside. A trick of the dimming light and gathering fog, he reasoned. Folks gathered in small groups at the round and long tables in the room.

He noticed, nearby, a youngish man- mid-thirties at most- dressed in an anorak and a thick woollen sweater (the thought passed: not the 1940s then). He had long black tousled hair- as he'd remembered HIS hair being once. A woman sat by him, a confused look on her face as she regarded the room. The longhaired man smiled at her, produced a pack of cards and proceeded to perform a trick. He watched him intently, but didn't catch the sleight of hand.

I always enjoyed magicians, he thought to himself- always liked to play odd tricks now and again....

"What trauma?" he asked again, realizing she'd not answered before.

She paused from drinking her tea, looked him in the eye again.

"It was different this time wasn't it? Something has happened to you. You ...." She trailed off, looked alarmed and then pitying.

That was like a shock through his system. That look definitely meant something... but what?

"Try and think." she implored, looking hard into his eyes, "Try and remember how you came to be like this. Your clothes- they seem ...well, dreadful, but that's not the point-" she regained her focus "Did you trip? Were you pushed? There seems to be some distress to the fabric... like you had taken a nasty fall. Is this stirring any memories?"

He tried to sift his memories, using this as a model to lay over the mixture of images, to see if it meant anything. There was- a vast...dish? Was that right? There was the sensation of falling- the faces of friends and a glowing figure... and then —

And then?

Something had gone wrong. The glowing figure had approached...*as I'd planned* he thought. Then... a rush of air, the tang of a vast electrical field, a shattering of reality.

He sat bolt upright, staring dead ahead, his eyes wide. The woman opposite started.

"Oh, my!" she said.

The grey haired man in the ragged clothes brought his hands together, his mouth widening into a manic smile. He clapped loudly.

"AHA!" he shouted. Many in the hall looked around, curious at this outburst.

He grabbed her hands across the table. Jessica was momentarily taken aback, but smiled none the less.

"JESSICA!" He grinned at her, recognition in his face at last. She squeezed his hands.

"Do you remember now?" She saw the smile fade from his face at her request. "I'm sorry- has it gone away again?"

He shook his head. His expression was grave.

"No. ...I'm becoming cognizant with my circumstances. Oh dear, oh dear..." He stood, swinging the tattered scarf he was suddenly aware he was wearing, over his shoulder. "I have to GO! Tegan-"

He staggered, barely grabbing the table in time to support himself. The mug of tea spun off the table crashing on the floor. Jessica stood to support him.

"You should take it easy- it's obviously been a testing time- Transformations can be difficult after they've just happened"

He gestured her away, still unable to stand properly. Jessica took a step back, still in range to catch him if he fell.

"JUST happened?! Good grief, dear lady— it's been TWENTY YEARS!"

Other heads turned at this. Across the room, the curly headed young man (who by now had developed a small appreciative audience) stopped halfway through a card trick and started to rise, intent on becoming involved. His female companion grabbed him by the arm.

"Jonathan- it's none of our business if some daft old bloke starts sounding off in this bizarre soup kitchen you felt compelled to drag me to. He probably does it every night about this time, sort of a tramp cabaret. I mean, look at his clothes- that big silly scarf for god's sake... what team'd that be? West Ham? Not, there's only the burgundy... Aston Villa? No same thing— I wouldn't worry, he'll sleep it off later."

Gently, he moved her hand off his arm.

"It's a little more serious than that."

He strode away from her. She turned and shrugged at the group gathered around.

"He does this all the time, you know." She spoke to them, but was really talking to herself. "Takes me somewhere.... interesting, and then odd things happen. Magicians, eh?"

The curly haired man stood by Jessica, his arms folded, considering the grey haired man.

"Jessica."

"Jonathan."

"Been like this long?" he started at the grey haired man curiously, looking for something but not finding it. "Hang on— he's not changed has he?"

The grey haired man looked up, serious. Realizing the man called Jonathan was right. That was it. *That's* what was wrong…

"It's called REGENERATION. Not 'change' not 'transformation'. Regeneration. And you're right, I didn't. Some force…. interceded at the last moment. Took my weakened form away, and trapped me. I've just managed to escape, but this body is weakened, should have re-generated twenty years ago. The trauma of escape is obviously what took away my memories."

Jonathan, tapping a finger on his lower lip, looked interestedly at the grey haired man.

"So, how much of your memory is back now? Do you know where you are?"

He looked around the hall, not quite registering where he was. He shook his head.

"It all seems faintly familiar …hmm, except you. Have we met?"

The curly haired man called Jonathan smiled broadly.

"Nope. The only place we SHOULD meet is here. And we haven't, up until now. Of course, with our record, 'should' is a very elastic concept. I keep expecting one of us to come knocking at my windmill some day."

"My record? Do I have a pattern of behaviour? Unconventional behaviour? Is that who I am?" It seemed to about equally bother and amuse the grey haired man.

Jessica looked disapprovingly at him. She crossed her arms, and the eyebrow seemed to rise even higher, as if that were possible.

"You are a rogue and a renegade. At various times, you've been wanted and then definitely NOT wanted by your own people. You have been a trickster and a force for good. You've broken rules; you've made others. You are a maverick, a time traveller."

Well, that explains not knowing what year it is, he thought to himself.

"So WHO am I?"

Jonathan began to mouth the word 'yes', but thought better of it…

Jessica met his eyes, staring at him, her face intent, serious.

"You", she began, pausing almost for dramatic effect, "are the Doctor."

Outside, as night fell, the boats in the harbour buffeted against their moorings, as the sea became choppy from strengthening wind and late tide. The early fog thickened, cutting visibility to a mere few feet. Those few hardy souls still out made their ways to bars and restaurants to snatch brief heat and light.

Few came near the Temporance Hall though. It was almost like they didn't notice it, that only those that should visit there did. Anyone peering through its windows would have seen the sight of an obviously deranged elderly figure being coaxed into sitting by a matronly woman and a young man in an anorak. Poor thing, they might comment to themselves and pass the scene by unaware of the true context on the scene within.

Jessica stood over the grey haired man now, as he started to ramble, half to himself, half to them.

"It's difficult, but from what memories I have I realize that I have to go back!" he gestured at the room, "Look at them all here- they have no sense of the fragile nature of reality! That the tapestry of time itself is being tugged apart one stitch at a time by…" he paused, his expression went blank again.

"By?" asked Jonathan, now intently considering the figure sitting before him, "By …the Master? The Daleks? The Cybermen? Who's the villain? Villains?"

The grey haired man paused, shook his head slowly.

"No… it's someone I've never encountered before… but someone who quite patently had encountered ME. Now how could that be, eh?"

Jessica considered this, then said:

"Red Queen Syndrome. In your later lives it seems to occur more and more- events you've yet to be part of have repercussions on your past selves."

He reached for the tea, but remembered he'd spilt it all. Another thought came to him now, out of the grey mist of his memories. He knew who HE was now -more or less, he acknowledged- but:

"Who are YOU both?" asked the Doctor.

Jessica and Jonathan looked at each other.

"Ah." Said Jessica, her eyebrows raising. She gestured to Jonathan, "You first."

Jonathan pursed his lips, looked skyward, then around to his companion who had got into an animated conversation with the folks around their table.

"Bit tricky, that one", he offered. "Well, basically, in a round about kind of parallel time stream kind of way, you could say-"

"We're you." said Jessica, exasperated by Jonathan's procrastination.

The Doctor looked baffled.

"We have to explain this every so often, and it's always ...unsatisfactory." She sat down opposite him again. "You know you've encountered previous selves? And how those occasions stir no memories?"

The Doctor considered this- the memories were coming back slowly now, still disjointed. He was certain he had encountered earlier selves on occasions, but they were almost events ...out of time. He wasn't aware of these meetings when he himself was that later self- the thought brought on a kind of migraine.

"Yes... there were my three earliest selves... we fought together and-" he paused, looked blank for a moment, they quizzical. "But if I KNEW that my third self was going to face Omega I should have been prepared..." He stopped again. "No, that makes no sense at all."

"You see, unsatisfactory.", said Jessica.

Jonathan, still standing, leant over the table towards the Doctor.

"It's a matter of time and space, you see." He spoke as if imparting a great truth. "Everything you -we- do, affects the time stream. Not only that, we affect OUR time stream. The selves you've encountered, and will continue to encounter come from close tributaries to the 'main' stream. That's why you have no memories of these encounters, because they didn't happen to 'you' as you are now."

The migraine, he considered, was getting worse.

Jonathan was in full flow now, though.

"At certain points, specific events lead to major changes. In the time stream, and in you. Remember that 'evil' third regeneration on that fascist Earth? Ever consider where he came from? There have been- will be- more, I mean, don't even get me started on the Valeyard..." The Doctor looked confused- the name rang a vague bell, but- Jessica shot Jonathan a sharp look. He looked surprised. Then considered.

"Oops. Not your problem yet. If ever. Where was I? Um, a better example-"

Jessica interrupted. "Remember when you changed Dalek history? You could have destroyed them forever, could have left time to continue as it had. You took a third path: you delayed their evolution"

The Doctor considered this-

"Yes— I couldn't face myself if I had made that choice, no matter what the Time Lords had asked..."

Jessica turned away, her face downcast. The Doctor considered her for a moment.

"How could I have lived with myself if I'd done that? Jessica?"

She turned to him, tears in the corners of her eyes.

"You would have travelled aimlessly through time and space, abandoned your companions. Eventually, you would involve yourself in a reckless scheme that resulted in the partial destruction of your TARDIS, and such a traumatic regeneration that you would actually" -she paused- "change gender. Not that such things matter for Gallifreyans, but..."

She stopped, sipped her tea, that had survived the Doctor's earlier fall, and continued:

"Purposeless, you settle in a English backwater town in the early part of their 20th century, to face the coming war. Realizing that this is to be one of the most traumatic times in that old country's history. Knowing the horror that awaits, the bombing, the slaughter. You want to live at a time that makes you feel validates your choice. That some things must be destroyed. But all the time, you hate yourself. Growing inward, more bitter, less.... human.

"And then, one day, unexpectedly, you find redemption. In children who see your science as magic, your TARDIS console as ...a bedstead." The Doctor and Jonathan looked curiously at this; Jessica gestured dismissively with her hand- " Well, that's far too long a story.... Anyway, as I was saying... you come to realize that your actions can count, in whatever small way. In time you move to America, to a fishing village, not unlike the one you just arrived from, and settle down, solving problems, crimes, and murders. In each little way, atoning for the greater death you caused, even if it was to the greatest scourge of

the galaxy."

Jonathan looked at her, impressed. The Doctor was still trying to grasp the significance. He turned to Jonathan.

"And when did WE ...diverge?"

Jonathan smiled.

"Hasn't happened yet. You may get gunned down in an alley by a Chinese gang, or find yourself on a future dystopian Earth in the company of a young woman who ends up calling herself 'the Professor' in honour of you. Or maybe, not either. I'm your...." He counted on his fingers, "Eighth. A *possible* Eighth. Bloody hell- Eighth! All those regenerations, lost so fast...

" I was weary of having lived in one form for nigh on five hundred years and then having got through a shocking number of lives in the space of a quarter century. So I decided to take a break from all the adventuring, and got the chameleon circuits to change to something that'll look inconspicuous in late 20th Century England." He shrugged, "Bloody thing picked a windmill. Go figure. Stuck with it now.

"Still, I settled down, revived my -your- love of tricks and magic, to live the quiet life for a while, made friends with my uh, companion over there. No problems, no Cybermen, Silurians, Daleks or whatever." He paused, "Well, except for the inordinate number of bizarre locked-room mysteries we keep encountering." He thought about this for a second, then smiled at The Doctor and Jessica. "Business as usual, really."

The Doctor had stood up again, steadying himself on the table once more. Jonathan shook hands.

"Good to meet you at last. If you ever feel like dropping in on the windmill..." he paused. "...you might want to leave it a couple of years?" He smiled, as did the Doctor.

"Understood." He said, smiling. "Glad the hair comes back, anyway."

Jonathan returned to his companion. The Doctor looked at Jessica.

"This place is some kind of dimensional nexus isn't it? Where disparate versions of myself -of other Time Lords? - may meet, escape the trials and tribulations of our contrary lives. Yes?" Jessica nodded. "But why such a structure? Why in a fishing village?"

"It's not actually IN a fishing village, that's just a doorway you took. This is just a low key, non-technological haven away from the living machines and metal streets of Gallifrey. You have a cottage in this town, you've visited it many times in your ...lives."

That sounded right. He also dimly remembered other homes scattered around, at different places, in different times. Even a barge on the Martian canals, he thought.

"I go out that door, I'm back in America, solving crime, or maybe just writing about it."

The Doctor smiled, then frowned.

"I have something of a problem though, don't I?"

Jessica nodded.

"What can we do about the breach in time that this abduction of yours caused? The events that created Jonathan and myself, and others present here are nothing compared to the forces that were unleashed on this occasion. Whoever is responsible has dammed the time stream, causing it to veer off its intended paths and has created a massive imbalance in the continuities."

She considered this for a moment, "It's a Dark Dimension," she added gravely.

The Doctor looked at her curiously, "That's awfully dramatic, don't you think?"

Jessica shook her head. "No, no- you see, this is a forced diversion, a deliberate attempt to interfere with the nature of space-time. Simple causality- the gainsay creation of a timeline through choices made by us, are part of the nature of the universe. Bigger acts -such as the Dalek dilemma that created me... are problematic. The Time Lords were meddling to end a great evil, but in doing so created greater problems- the Daleks are time travellers too, this act just created more of them of a different nature. How many versions of Davros have you faced, eh? "

She paused, sipped more tea. "This though, is something else again! It seems that someone is feeding on the chaos energy that disrupting your time line creates, or maybe they just wanted you out of the way.... Whatever the reason, it has created a bubble of false history."

The two of them sat silently for a long moment. The Doctor sighed.

"I shouldn't exist, should I?"

Jessica shook her head. "Your fourth incarnation dies in a fall," she smiled "Having once again saved the world. Of course."

The Doctor sat back in his chair, looking around the room.

"So… I have to go back, set this all right. Create a situation in which I never got trapped, never got seized by …whoever it was. I need to put the timeline straight," he smiled at that. "Well, as straight as it ever gets."

Outside, the rain came down in heavy sheets, the chill wind buffeted the boats in the harbour, bumping the seacraft gently against each other. Nearby, wind chimes sounded, and further distant, the bray of a foghorn could be heard. Closer to the Temporance Hall, another -quite distinct- sound echoed in the foggy night. A shrill, mechanical rising and falling sound, accompanying the appearance of a vessel that charted far further courses than these barges and trawlers.

In the Temporance Hall, the Doctor and Jessica accepted the new pot of tea, sent over by the manager. Jessica turned and nodded to the man who stood at the back of the hall near a door leading to the kitchens. He smiled and turned back.

"He's here, isn't he?"

The manager looked up with a start. "Oh, it's you."

He sat at a table in the kitchen, starting to cut at a large wholemeal loaf. The stranger, shorter by far than the manager, approached the table.

"Yes," acknowledged the manager, "It's him." The stranger sat down opposite him. "I'm making myself a sandwich. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, I think I am, actually." The stranger smiled. It was a kindly face, but one shrouded in shadow, as if from some desperate loss. "I've done what needed to be done. Now it's just a case of him returning, making this circle complete. I just wanted one look. At what might have been…"

The manager, a boisterous man- wide of smile, wider of girth- grinned through his beard. "You know it's for the best. His time is an aberration. He needs to …go back. Resume the shining path. There'll be other branches, but his was meant to be the true line."

The stranger stood, and walked towards the door. It was still ajar, and he could see the Doctor and Jessica deep in conversation. Though older now than he should be, and still weak from his enforced isolation for all those years, there was still something vital about him, thought the stranger. If only things had gone differently….

"It's such a pity," said the stranger, turning back to the manager. "He was in many ways, the best of us." The stranger walked back to the table. The manger pushed across the rough-cut sandwich, which the stranger gratefully took.

"What next for you?" asked the manager, between bites.

The stranger looked thoughtful. "I return to Earth of the mid-26th century. I face the Adversary, the…. 'Creature'… once more. I don't know if I'll survive this time…" He removed his hat as he sat down, propping his umbrella against the side of the table. He picked up the sandwich, out of which bits of salad fell. He looked curiously at the manager. "Are you sure there's *enough* in here?"

The manager smiled. "Eat it up. You'll need your strength."

"What about you? Why did you take this path?" asked the stranger between bites. The manager beamed again.

"Sometimes, you chose other goals, other ambitions. I knew the myriad timelines were safe in the hands of those out there - and yourself- when I came along, my goals were different…" he paused, poured tea from a pot into a cup in front of the stranger, "I wasn't the combative type," he smiled again. "Ha! I'd much rather *climb mountains*! Ha ha!" he slapped the stranger on the shoulder, dislodging more sliced tomatoes and cucumber from his sandwich.

"Mountains. Well, why not," mused the stranger.

"Don't worry about your fourth self. It'll be all right. In the end."

"So what happens to him next?"

The manager rose, wagging his finger at the stranger, the Doctor's seventh incarnation.

"Now, now- You mean you don't *remember*?" he grinned, "there are things you need to know,

things you can't be allowed to." He wandered to the door, to watch the Fourth Doctor and Jessica. He carried on talking to the Seventh Doctor. "When he steps through that door, out of the Hall, he'll be in London. In 1999. His mind is coming back in fits and starts. He'll work it out."

"Who can he turn to for help? Who is there in that time?" asked the Seventh Doctor.

The manager, turning back now to face the Seventh Doctor, was grinning broadly.

"Oh, you never know— that's the thing about you, about us, there's always an Ace in the Hole to play."

The Fourth Doctor finished his tea. Jessica looked away.

"Well, I must go- " he paused, "-wherever. WHEN- ever. This has to be resolved. One way or another. " He started to rise. Jessica put down her mug. She stood by him, adjusting her wrap, something to do instead of speaking, instead of addressing the situation.

"Jessica- thank you for this— you've helped me get my mind together ...to a degree".

She shrugged." I bought you a cup of tea, we had a little chat. It's hardly a stressful thing."

He smiled at her.

"Well, see you again, sometime?" he moved away, off towards the door waving to her as he went.

"No, " she said to herself, "I really don't think so."

As he stepped through the door, he didn't encounter the foggy seafront, but a shabby London backstreet. Temporarily disoriented, he fell - grabbing onto a doorway to a derelict junkyard. He looked at the sign his hands had leant against. It read:

FOREMAN'S YARD.

He looked across at the battered street name sign, the bolts long rusted and the lettering worn. "Trotter's Lane" he read out, smiling, a tear rose in his eye, "Oh, Susan, Susan- I remember now...". Saying this, he fell again.

In the distance he heard the heavy steps of booted feet running towards him. He looked up, as the figures approached. "So this is how it begins... and ends..." and collapsed again.

Back in the Temporance Hall, Jessica had sat down again, arranging her belongings and getting ready to leave. A shadow fell over her, and she turned to see a short, sad faced man. He was carrying an umbrella, it's handle curved like the question marks on her shawl.

"Well, hello again," she said.

He smiled. "Hello, Jessica."

"You just missed him," she said as she packed her clutch purse. "So sad..."

The Seventh Doctor put his hand on her shoulder. "We each have our destinies- he has been kept from his. You should be happy- you've helped him."

She stood, half-a-head taller than this regeneration. He looked up at her. "You still feel you're paying that debt? It was the Daleks. I understood the choice... Jessica, there are things I've done since...." His voice trailed as he shook his head. He looked up at her again, smiling. "But that's for another time. Let me walk you to the door, we'll talk again, when this is all done. I'm sure you have matters of your own to attend to."

She nodded her head, putting her arm through the crook of his, as they walked.

"Well, I'd popped in here to consider the case of the visiting dignitary who had escorted some valuable ancient artefacts to the local museum who was killed yesterday in *such* peculiar circumstances. I *do* have my doubts about his young researcher who seems to know rather a *lot* about our local history..."

They passed Jonathan's table, both nodding as they went.

"Bloody hell", said Jonathan, "They're getting like London Buses... don't see one for years and then"

His companion turned to him, her amusement at the place he'd brought them to long since passed. "Are we going yet, Jonathan? I've got a deadline you know- my editor won't wait!"

Jonathan rose, as did she. He smiled warmly at her.

"Nah, " he said, "there's *always* time..."

She turned to Jonathan, a quizzical expression on her face, "So why did we come here tonight? I

thought you were going to take me to see some old magicians or something."

"There was someone I wanted to see, one last time."

"Who?" she looked alarmed, "That tramp? Well, never be let it said you reach above your social status..."

He smiled at her. Inside, he wondered how long they'd have, how long before circumstances meant he'd have to move on again. To leave her, and this life. He cast the thought aside. Matters for another day.

"He's someone I used to ...know. C'mon, I'll buy you lunch..."

When they reached the door, the manager was talking to two bald men, one white, one African-American. He was gently blocking their way in, but not making a big deal of it.

They both appeared to be military types, though didn't dress that way. Their clothes had a futuristic edge to them. The African American had a neat goatee, and smiled warmly as he spoke. Jonathan's companion thought she saw a different street visible behind the two men, something exotic... alien? But that didn't make sense. Some kind of optical illusion.

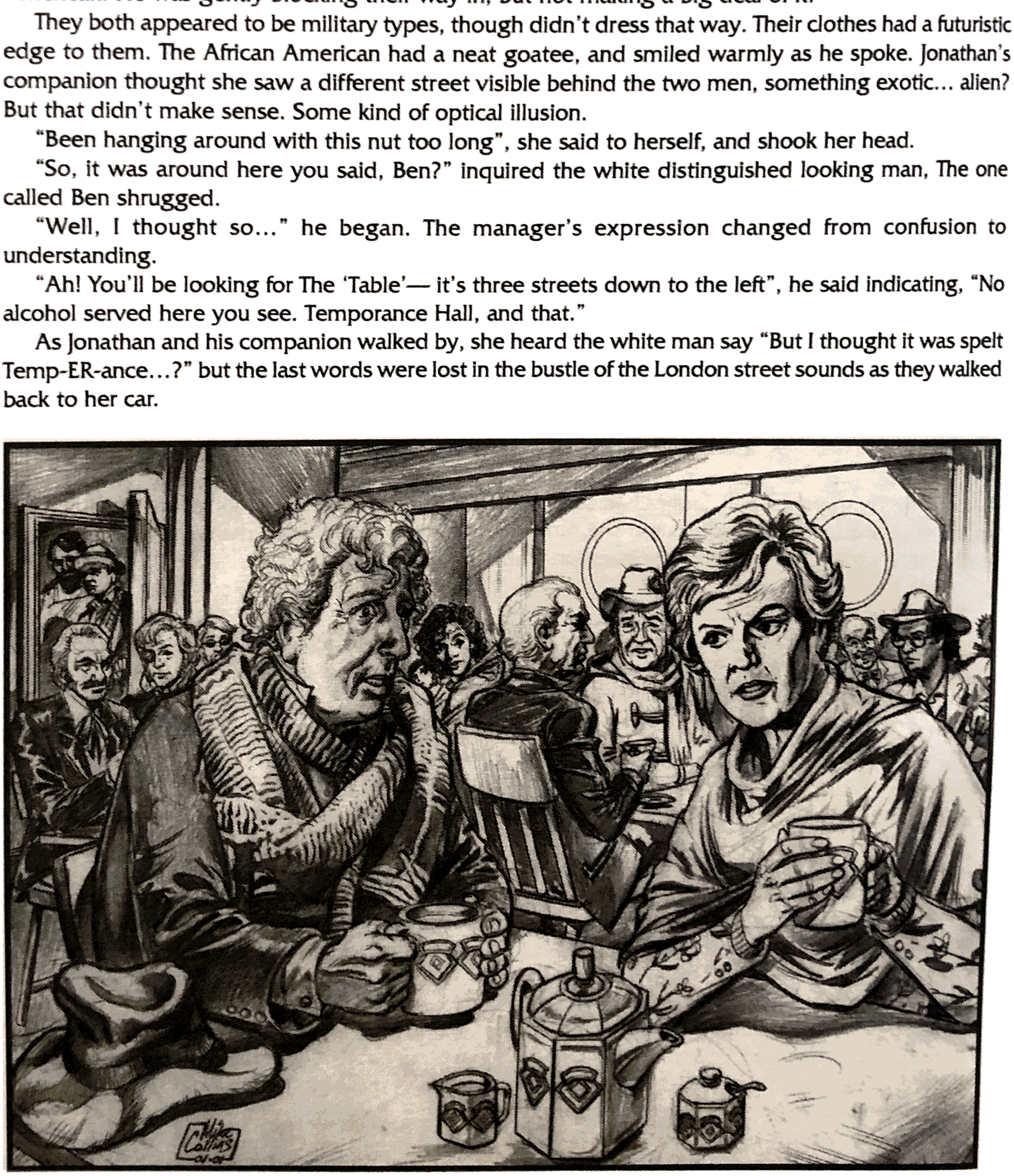
"Been hanging around with this nut too long", she said to herself, and shook her head.

"So, it was around here you said, Ben?" inquired the white distinguished looking man, The one called Ben shrugged.

"Well, I thought so..." he began. The manager's expression changed from confusion to understanding.

"Ah! You'll be looking for The 'Table'— it's three streets down to the left", he said indicating, "No alcohol served here you see. Temporance Hall, and that."

As Jonathan and his companion walked by, she heard the white man say "But I thought it was spelt Temp-ER-ance...?" but the last words were lost in the bustle of the London street sounds as they walked back to her car.



Satisfaction Guaranteed

by Arnold T Blumberg

PART I: A PITCH FOR THE TIME LORDS

It was an unusually quiet day in the TARDIS. With Kamelion off meditating in his quarters, Turlough sketching the scenery outside and Tegan hunting for a new ensemble more suitable for the calming climes of the Eye of Orion, the Doctor had finally resigned himself to tackling a long overdue repair job- rebuilding the main console.

Recent events had left the six-sided control centre of the ship on the verge of collapse, and that simply could not be allowed to continue. Taking a deep breath (and muttering a prayer to himself), the Doctor gathered his tools from the floor and slid under one edge of the console. A few minutes of work uncovered a network of fibre-optic wiring and circuit panels. The Doctor started poking about, hoping to find a way to effect repairs with a minimum of fuss. He had promised Tegan that he would refurbish the whole thing; she would not recognise the old girl when he was finished.

'Why don't I just keep my mouth shut?' the Doctor muttered to himself.

As he prodded a circuit cluster with the neutron ram, he noted a peculiar light blinking steadily beneath a tangle of burnt leads and chips. It was a signal device of some kind, he realised. Definitely Gallifreyan in origin, but not a component he could remember seeing before. It appeared to be trying to transmit, but the melted material around it had prevented it from operating properly. The Doctor cleaned away the charred plastic and metal and tried to remove the device, but before he could finish the task, he felt another presence in the room and leapt to his feet.

Standing on the other side of the console, smiling disconcertingly at the Doctor and resting a hand on a brown leather bag slung over his left shoulder, was a short, jovial looking fellow with rounded features, thinning hair and weary but twinkling eyes. His clothes were shimmering in the light but a bit worn and had not been pressed in some time. His shoes were a mass of scuffmarks and frayed lacing. About his waist he wore a variety of storage modules. He stepped forward and thrust his right hand forward.

'Good to see you again, Thet'! Just call me the Salesman, will you? I like to keep up appearances when I'm on the job... so to speak."

'You?' The Doctor moaned, too confused to accept the gesture of greeting. The other man shrugged, and let his hand drop; he shucked the bag from his shoulder and onto the floor.

'Small universe, isn't it? But then you've got to go where the work is, haven't you? I got your signal and came right out. Travel without a TARDIS is tricky, even from Gallifrey, but I'm used to it. So, where's your little tin dog then?'

'He's not...'

'No worries,' the Salesman dismissed it immediately, his eyes closed as he smiled smugly. 'No time for idle chit-chat when there's work to be done! I am here to help, after all.'

'Help? Are you trying to tell me that you came from Gallifrey? That the signal device implanted in my TARDIS brought you here?'

'That's right! It's been a few centuries since I've been back in the old circles,' he explained, stirring the air with a finger, 'but I've been subcontracted to do some field repair work on TARDIS time capsules while I wait for a few other business arrangements to pan out.' The Salesman ducked under the console and pulled the signal device from the circuitry with a twist. He admired its construction with what seemed like considerable pride.

'Nice one, eh? Something I cooked up way back when, before it all went down the tubes and I had to make my excuses and leave, before anyone could feel my collar. Not unlike someone else I could mention,' The Salesman added, winking at the Doctor. 'The device was integrated into every TARDIS, and equipped with a miniature chameleon circuit, in order to blend in with the surrounding hardware.' The Salesman leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, 'We found that when owners were aware of

the little bugger, it tended to lower confidence, so we cloaked it. That way, people were less likely to inadvertently invalidate their warranty by trying to remove it. It was meant to be seen as a helping hand, downloading up-to-the-minute technical support in dire situations.' The Salesman looked at the console and shook his head. 'And you've certainly got a dire one here, haven't you? Looks like the signal was delayed a bit though. What a mess.'

The Doctor stared at the intruder in disbelief, registering only about half of what the smaller man was saying. He was about to protest, when the Salesman slapped him on the shoulder.

'You look like you've got a pleasant, open face this time 'round, Doc! I think we can fix you right up, and turn this rackety old crock into something that really sings!'

'Look here, I really think this is rather presumptuous of you. I have a mind to...'

'Tut tut, Doctor,' the Salesman said, his eyes closed and hands outstretched, 'No need to get all tetchy. I'm only here to make your lives a little easier, you know. I think you'll be quite chuffed with what I have to show you.' The Salesman tapped his nose with an index finger, and winked again. 'It's all very affordable as well, with our special instalment plan!'

'*Instalment?* Listen Dra... *Salesman*, I should think you'd understand, it's a bit rude to just project yourself into someone's TARDIS, without so much as a by-your-leave.' The Doctor was livid; he glared at the Salesman, as the new arrival knelt and opened his bag to pick through its contents. He was not listening to the Doctor at all. After a moment's silence, another thought occurred to the flustered Doctor.

'If the Time Lords have this kind of access to my TARDIS, why haven't they tried to recall me, or drag me back to Gallifrey?'

'That's the High Council's business, Doctor,' the Salesman stated simply as he rummaged through his bag. 'Not my department, I'm afraid. The big business doesn't filter down to us little people in the trenches,' he confided, tracing invisible trails in the air with wiggling fingers as if in illustration, 'but never mind. I've always preferred the salesman's life anyway. Gets you out and about, meeting interesting people like yourself. That's why I decided the title would suit me.' The Salesman stood bolt upright suddenly, sidling up to the Doctor and elbowing him in the ribs. The Doctor frowned and rubbed his side. 'We all like our titles, eh "Doctor"?'

The Doctor folded his arms defiantly and eyed the Salesman with suspicion. 'And is that the only reason why you've taken on this identity? A genuine appreciation for the vocation?'

'Well, it's what I was loomed to do, isn't it? I've always been blessed with a certain...' The Salesman searched for the right word, hands grasping at the air. '...*persuasive* quality that cuts through all the complications and gets right to the hearts of the matter. I'm a salesman through and through.'

The Doctor stared wordlessly, his eyes boring into the Salesman's own. The Salesman furtively glanced back, a wave of guilt washing over him.

'Well... *that,* and a little run-in with a bunch of very unreasonable Migrozian traders, who currently have a price of ten million grotzits attached to my name. Doesn't hurt to travel incognito, but then, you know *all* about that, don't you Thet'? Ah! Here we are then!'

The Salesman's mood brightened once more as he removed a small chrome-plated sphere, held it theatrically on the tips of his fingers and grinned at the Doctor. Thumbing a hidden control on one side, which made a satisfying click, he pointed to four squat spider-like legs that sprang from the underside of the sphere. He then placed it on top of the console's time rotor. The Doctor moved to stop him, but the sphere had already begun to glow. Suddenly, a burst of light shot from the top of the metallic globe and washed down over the console. When the light faded, a new console stood where the old one had been only seconds before. An occasional pop and sputter betrayed the fact that this was merely a holographic image overlaying the real console.

'Allow me to introduce the very latest in primary console design, the 83ZL! With removable bubble memory slices, fully integrated telepathic control systems, keyboard and touch-sensitive input, polychromatic monitors, easily configurable sub-panels and a thousand year warranty on parts and labour! Quite a sight, isn't it?'

'*Quite a sight?*' The Doctor fumed, rounding the console and leaning over his uninvited guest. His voice grew breathy and cracked with anger. 'You barge into my TARDIS without warning, interrupt my work, and then attach some kind of holographic generator to my time rotor without permission! What sort of...' As the Doctor furiously indicated the console, his eyes happened to fall upon a particular

panel, and he stopped dead. He moved across to get a better view of the hologram and pointed. 'Is that what I think it is?'

The Salesman grinned. 'Indeed it is, Doctor! A multiphase power grid with positive feedback overdrive, linked directly into the ship's main artron regulator! You know what that means, eh?' he said with a slick smile.

'Yes, I think so,' the Doctor replied quietly, still flushed with excitement. 'Programming short hops would be so much easier. I wouldn't have to manually recalibrate the power flow every time I input coordinates.'

'Precisely! That's what the 83ZL is all about, you see, making your travels a little easier, a little more controllable, and certainly a lot more comfortable.' The Salesman rocked forward on the balls of his feet as he spoke, as if he were sharing some secret confidence with the Doctor. 'Why should you have to suffer from an antiquated coordinate computer; an outmoded power manager and a processor speed that's no better than an abacus?' Sliding an arm around the Doctor's shoulder, a swift move that the Doctor registered with an uncomfortable grimace, the Salesman indicated an imaginary vista somewhere off in the distance. The Doctor caught himself peering in the same direction before checking himself; he rolled his eyes with embarrassment.

'Just think of it! The 83ZL will take you to the next level of space/time exploration! Just a few quick taps and there you'll be, out by the frontiers of the Zylbanon Star Group, or in the distant past chatting up historical personages like Isaac Newton or Keldrix the Third! And with these self-cleaning systems, you'll have lots more time to engage in battle with the forces of evil and weave yourself into the ongoing tapestry of history. Satisfaction guaranteed, Doctor!' The Salesman crossed his fingers and swept them quickly across his chest.

The Doctor was listening in spite of himself. He had to admit; this was starting to sound rather *appealing*. It was not as if he could just pop back to the Panopticon and '*acquire*' a state-of-the-art ship without difficulty. And he had gotten used to the old girl, so it would be much easier if he simply upgraded.

Rounding the console image with some interest, the Doctor withdrew his glasses from an inside pocket and slipped them on as he leaned in to examine another panel. Another control caught his eye and he allowed himself a burst of enthusiasm.

'Automated temporal drift compensators; amazing! No more constant readjustment in the vortex.'

'Naturally,' the Salesman replied reassuringly, slowly following the Doctor around the image at a casual pace. 'You wouldn't want anything else, and we wouldn't dream of putting you at a disadvantage. Oh no, not with this model.'

The Doctor straightened and removed his glasses as he peered at the Salesman, trying to regain some semblance of detachment. The Salesman's smile convinced him that he was not succeeding at all.

'What about intrusion countermeasures?' he asked, placing emphasis on the word '*intrusion*' as he looked pointedly at the Salesman. 'You know, my recent trouble with the console stems largely from...'

'The Cybermen, of course,' the smaller man supplied, without prompting. The Doctor's mouth tightened, but he said nothing. 'My job is to be as informed about my customer's situation as possible, Doctor. No worries there; this console has an all-new security package that includes an augmented interior weapons inhibitor,' he pointed to the relevant control read-out with a flourish, 'and a more advanced set of HADS implementation protocols. And yes, this new console comes with much more than just what you see here.' Tapping a few buttons on a small control device attached to his belt, the Salesman called up a display above the console image that highlighted an impressive variety of options packages. The Doctor squinted at the menu and stroked his chin.

'We also supply a complete upgrade solution that will mate this control device to your existing systems and make your TARDIS sail through the vortex like a Type 80... or as near as!'

'Hmm,' the Doctor nodded. 'And how does it handle multiple operators? There was an occasion some time back when a destination setting was input through the influence of an enemy and it caused some serious...'

'Yes, the Event One incident; nasty bit of business that,' the Salesman agreed, circling the console, and beckoning for the Doctor to follow. The deceptively youthful Time Lord did so with fading reluctance. 'As you can see here, this is a flexible input device, capable of handling multiple users or locking out anyone you feel is unqualified to handle the full controls. You can instruct the console to accept partial

or no input from any of your travelling companions. The settings can be updated at any time, by you alone, through the use of a simple passkey.'

'Very impressive indeed,' the Doctor admitted. 'And rather stylish too.' He ran a hand along the moulded edge of one panel and admired the glittering crystalline time rotor. The movement sent a ripple through the hologram, and the Doctor withdrew his hand as if he had been burned.

'Too right! You can't travel without style, can you? The 83ZL is functional and yet also quite modern. No more ugly handles, knobs or slide controls. They were always jamming or breaking anyway, and for Rassilon's sake, who knew what they were *for* half the time!' The Doctor momentarily forgot himself and smiled in agreement. The Salesman whispered again. 'I bet you were even using different controls for the same function a lot of the time, am I right?' The Doctor's smile faded and he stepped back, trying to regain some personal space.

'Well, sometimes,' he hedged, 'but it often seems like the TARDIS has a mind of her own. Even the door control shifted in position from time to time,' the Doctor added.

The Salesman shook his head sympathetically. 'A machine with a mind of her own, but then she doesn't hear too well, does she? These old models were configured with a weaker telepathic linkage you see. Control function drift was all too common. A TARDIS tries to interpret the needs of its owner, as you well know, but the accuracy wasn't too reliable in the 40's. Now, the 83ZL virtually eliminates function drift and creates a much stronger symbiotic bond between TARDIS and user. She'll read you loud and clear, I guarantee it. Oh!' The Salesman hopped around to the side of the console nearest the door and proudly indicated the panel in front of him.

'And that pesky door control? Big, red and always right here where you need it the most!'

'Very nice,' the Doctor agreed, casting a long lingering gaze over the console image. The Salesman beamed, hooking his thumbs into the rim of his belt. His job done, he awaited the verdict. The Doctor tapped his mouth with a contemplative finger, for what seemed an age. Finally, he let a slow breath out in resignation.

'All right. How much?'

'Thought you'd never ask, Doc!' The Salesman went over to his bag and retrieved a lengthy sheet of paper that unfurled to the floor and rolled over to the far wall. 'This is just the 83ZL purchase agreement, along with the thousand year warranty and some other additional legal folderol about terms of use, that sort of thing. All very standard, Doctor; no worries.'

The Doctor put his glasses back on and started to read through the contract. He felt his eyelids growing heavy as he attempted to wade through the labyrinthine language crowding the pages with fine print in Old High Gallifreyan, but a few stolen glances at the console convinced him to cut the review short.

'Fine,' the Doctor proclaimed, pretending to sound confident and informed. 'Everything looks to be in order here. Shall I...' The Salesman grinned, and produced a stylus almost from thin air. The Doctor took it, and inscribed a question mark inside the empty box at the top of the page.

'There we are then!' The Salesman retrieved the pen and document. He pressed the corner of the page and eyed the Doctor's expression smugly as the paper rolled of its own accord back into a tight tube, before he tucked it away in his bag. 'Payment will of course be handled by remote transfer of funds back at the Prydonian Bank, which you've authorized on page 5F of the agreement. And that just about does it!'

'Well, when do I get...'

'Why, right away of course!' The Salesman reached over, turned off the holographic projector and tossed it back in the bag. Revealing a small metallic band around his left wrist, the Salesman twisted it methodically and a shimmering distortion field encompassed the console, accompanied by a muted but familiar wheezing groaning sound. Moments later, the effect faded; the old console was gone, replaced by a gleaming new control system, standing proudly in the centre of the room. The Doctor and the Salesman admired it with silent reverence for a moment, until the visitor finally uttered an appreciative 'tch' and prepared to leave. 'Amazing things, those temporal installation engines...' the Doctor marvelled.

'Well, I must be on my way, Doctor,' he said rapidly, thrusting his hand forward once more and shaking the Doctor's hand enthusiastically. The Doctor responded numbly, without protest. 'I have light years to travel yet. There's a bloke stranded in the Xerrineen Nebula with a faulty Type 60; a small observation team from the Patrexes Institute, who need a chameleon circuit upgrade...' The Salesman paused and looked at the Doctor as he flung the bag over his shoulder. 'Oh, and I'm sorry to say that's

something I'm afraid we can't accomplish on site, Doctor, not with this model.'

'Ah.' Momentary hope in the Doctor's eyes faded once again.

'Well, time to push off!' The Salesman operated a control on the same metallic band as before and waved happily. 'Pleasure doing business with ya, Thet'!'

The Doctor nodded and watched as the Salesman faded into nothingness, leaving no trace of his visit...apart from the shining new console that hummed and blinked happily in front of the Doctor. He shook his head, almost unable to process what had happened, but he was overjoyed to see that his ship would benefit from some much needed repairs. Better still was that he no longer had to accomplish them himself. 'Now we'll travel in style,' he thought, 'and what's more, Tegan will have no more reason for complaints.'

As he circled the console, with a mixture of pride and contentment, he took a small orange flannel from his pocket and dusted the surface lightly. He rubbed at a smudge here and there and fussed over the gleaming surfaces to assure himself that this new console was real and operating as well as it seemed to be. He tucked the cloth away with satisfaction as Tegan walked through the interior door, wearing a light summery dress with a Mondrian pattern. She regarded the console with some surprise but decided not to give the Doctor the satisfaction of acting impressed. It would only encourage him.

'Finished?' she asked succinctly.

'Yes. Looks rather splendid, doesn't it?' he ventured, in expectation of a gushing review.

'But will the TARDIS work properly?' she asked. The Doctor was visibly hurt.

'Of course, once everything is running.'

'Didn't you repair anything?'

The Doctor was hoping to avoid another verbal sparring session but a momentary twinge of guilt concerning the true origins of the console pushed him into a more defensive mood.

'Well, the TARDIS is more than a machine, Tegan.' he protested, trying to come up with something that sounded convincing, 'It's like a person. It needs coaxing, persuading, encouraging.' he explained, experimentally flipping another switch.

'You mean it's just as unreliable,' she replied acidly.

'You have little faith, Tegan.' the Doctor said with a confident air of authority. He strode purposefully to the door control, flashed an arched look at Tegan and demonstratively lifted the handle. The door didn't open.

'Do you blame me?'

'You've got to be kidding,' he thought. Smirking at Tegan and swallowing what remained of his pride, he employed an age-old technique for repairing TARDIS control systems, handed down from incarnation to incarnation. After a swift blow with his fist, the doors swung open.

'Let the buyer beware,' he thought ruefully, choosing to ignore Tegan's derisive chuckle, as he stepped out to greet the Orion day.

PART II: PITCHING A FIT

It was an unusually loud day in the TARDIS...or at least it was until the fight ended and both parties stormed off to spend some quality time in solitude. With Peri off sulking deep in the corridors of the ship, her pride still smarting after another in a series of blistering rows with the Doctor, the garishly dressed Time Lord was basking in the afterglow of his latest egocentric tirade and was amusing himself by poking and prodding at some of the more finicky control systems in the main console.

The majority of the mechanisms did not need any repairs per se; in fact, for an aging Type 40, the TARDIS was in decent shape. Recent erratic behaviour was instead directly attributable to the extremely unstable mental processes of its symbiotic user. Although he was months into his sixth incarnation, this Doctor had never really settled into himself. He was a man in a constant state of turmoil, and the telepathic circuits were getting quite a beating as a result. This, of course, was something about which the Doctor himself was blissfully unaware, but he believed that he could recognise a mechanical fault when he saw one, and was determined to once more prove his superiority to his equipment.

'It's Time Lord versus technology!' he announced dramatically to no one in particular. Removing his

coat and rolling up his sleeves, the Doctor licked his lips and dove into the heart of the problem. He held the tools aloft and poised as if in preparation for a joust. An hour later, he still had not located the source of the trouble, and was beginning to lose patience with the old girl.

'Why is it every time I try to improve this old rust bucket, the entire thing goes haywire?' he declared to an empty console room. Roughly pushing his tousled hair back onto his high forehead and dabbing the perspiration from his brow with a shirt sleeve, the Doctor renewed his crusade. He sent a neuronic probe in to check the telepathic circuits. They were clearly suffering from a loss of synaptic adhesion, he thought, with the selfsame confidence of any amateur mechanic. Resetting the probe to deliver a burst of energy, he reinserted the device and gritted his teeth. Just a bit of a push in the right direction...

'*Oh no!*' The Doctor glared at the smouldering remains of the telepathic circuits, as if directing his frustration at the component might frighten it back into working order. He was suddenly seized by a feeling that there was someone standing just at his shoulder. He was right. Large as life, and twice as ugly, the Salesman leaned forward. He sniffed at the circuitry and made a clicking noise with his tongue.

'It's the chronostat. It always is.'

The Doctor leapt to his feet, and swept an accusatory finger at the Salesman, but the smaller man skipped back.

'What are *YOU* doing in my TARDIS!' he bellowed. Somehow, he managed to twist the end of the sentence into a declaration rather than a question.

'Easy, Doctor! I'm only here to help.'

The Doctor rounded on the Salesman murderously, and to his surprise, the newcomer found himself retreating around the smoking console.

'Help?'

'Yeah, Doctor. Like before. After all...'

'*Help?!*'

'Will you let a man get a...'

'*HELP?!*'

The Salesman flinched and took a few more steps back, his hands jerking involuntarily upward to protect himself from the expectation of an imminent attack.

'Yeah, help! The signal went out... It's all covered in the warranty, you know!'

'You burst into my TARDIS without warning, interrupt my concentration, not to mention some very delicate repair work, and now you want me to believe some cock and bull story that you're here to help?'

'You know,' the Salesman said, wagging his finger at the Doctor before thinking better of it, and turning it into a gesture of supplication. 'You're not the man you were, Thet'!'

'O-ho! Not such an easy mark, you mean?' The Doctor rapped the console soundly with his fist. 'This third-rate dustbin of a console hasn't worked right since you foisted it on me!'

'Now, just one minute, Doctor! You bought it fair and square! And I might add you were completely satisfied with the terms of the deal!'

'Satisfied? *Satisfied?* Swindled, more like! You couldn't have picked a more pliable incarnation to dupe with your oily rhetoric! And let me tell you something else, "*Salesman*" or whatever you're calling yourself these days,' the Doctor continued; his face was a livid mask as he pursued the Salesman steadily around the room, giving him no quarter, '*I* will not tolerate any outside intrusion of my TARDIS today, tomorrow, or for the remainder of whatever warranty agreement my former self was vapid enough to sign! Do I make myself clear?'

The Doctor stopped, his hands at his waist. The sudden silence was uncomfortable. The Salesman tried not to look at the Doctor's reddened face; he knew he was not about to make a sale on this trip.

'Yeah, all right. Fine.' The Salesman peevishly slung his bag over his shoulder, trying to restore a little of his dignity. 'But let me tell you - it's very difficult to build any kind of rapport with your customer when he keeps regenerating all the time!'

'OUT!'

The Salesman's mouth was a line. He blinked uncontrollably with embarrassment, and operated the control on the Time Ring. Just before he vanished, he called out to the Doctor.

'Just remember one thing. When you cracked open the telepathic circuits...'

The Doctor stared at him with barely concealed disinterest.

'You voided the warranty!' The Salesman melted away into the vortex, with only the knowledge that he was one of the few in existence who had managed to steal the last word from *this* Doctor to keep him warm.

Alone once more, the Doctor sighed to himself, and gathered his tools together. He closed the hatch under the console, and resolved to repair the telepathic circuits another time. In the short-term, it should not affect normal ship operations; he sometimes wondered about the need for them at all. He was not about to call the Time Lords for assistance any time soon. Yes, everything was quite all right in the end. Another victory for his unique blend of insight and intuition!

Peri shuffled in, just as the Doctor was tucking away the toolkit and turning back to observe the console, still congratulating himself for his victory over that door-stepping shill.

'I wanted to say I'm sorry, Doctor.'

'And well you should be after what you said!' The Doctor didn't look up but instead, he moved to another control panel.

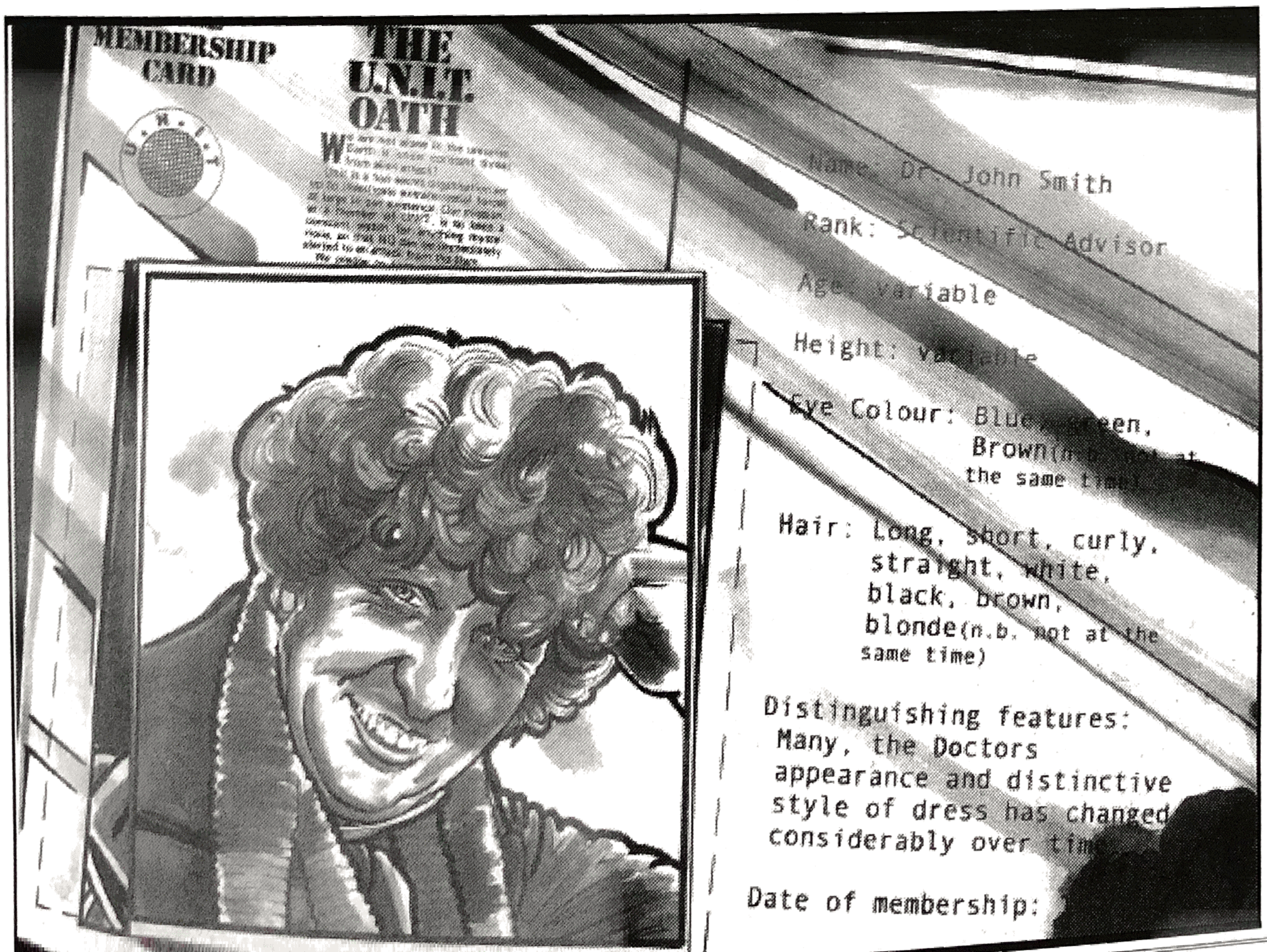
'You could at least accept the apology with a bit more graciousness!' Peri snapped back, moving in for the kill, but the Doctor put up a warning hand.

'Ah-ahh! Before you say something you'll regret... *again,* let me propose a visit to Gloridia Prime. A lovely place, just what the errant time traveller needs to revitalise the system!' Without waiting for Peri's agreement, the Doctor set the coordinates. Throwing the final switch, the Doctor steadied himself for the violent lurch that accompanied the ship's entry into the vortex, sending them spinning wildly toward their destination. As she had not been prepared for it, Peri clambered up from the floor, collecting her wits for the twelfth time that day, while the Doctor patted himself on the back for another superbly executed manoeuvre.

'How do you know I'll actually like it?' Peri muttered, dusting herself off.

'Oh, I promise!' The Doctor crossed his fingers and swept them across his chest. Peri eyed him warily. The Doctor leaned towards her, and grinned.

'Satisfaction guaranteed, Peri! Satisfaction guaranteed!'



Biggles and the Fractured Dimensions

by Finn Clark

Sunlight fractured into shards as the sky crinkled. Biggles pushed up his goggles and rubbed his eyes, steering his Sopwith Camel one-handed as he cruised at sixteen thousand feet. He'd been flying double shifts all week due to unexplained disappearances in No. 266 Squadron, but if the hours were affecting him, then he'd be dashed if he flew again without the all-clear from the Medical Officer. They were short-handed already. He wouldn't be popular if he got himself killed.

He gave himself a good rub, but the hallucinations didn't go. Instead, they got prettier. Spikes and strange colours seemed to crawl into his eyes, but then all that nonsense vanished and Biggles was flying through a blue sky again. Below him was Le Cateau, as usual. Biggles looked through his left wings and saw good old Dick, beetling along in formation with him. Was his patrol partner seeing things too? Surely not! Dick was a dependable chap, full of spunk, who always kept a firm hand on his rod!

Biggles scanned the sky for enemies. He squinted between his fingers into the sun, and then looked down over the landscape.

A black speck caught his eye. Biggles stiffened.

'My hat!' he ejaculated. 'If it isn't another blinking sausage!'

A second look confirmed his initial impression. Hanging in the air like that, it could only be an enemy observation balloon, watching the British artillery and troop movements. The lack of planes around it was surprising, but perhaps the Germans thought anti-aircraft fire could compensate for the lack of an escort. If so, it would be a bad miscalculation! Sometimes Biggles thought he'd spent his entire life shooting up sausages over Duneville, but he was always eager to add another to his tally. Everyone knew sausage was his special meat – his and Wilkinson's of 287! He waved at Dick to attract his attention, and then dived downwards.

Those dashed colours returned! Biggles swore and tried to concentrate, but that black sphere below was appearing to grow spines and a disturbingly impossible sense of *depth*. Biggles throttled back to glide down in a wide circle, now suspecting a trap. Where was this thing's basket? Observation balloons had observers hanging beneath them, gathering data for Germany. What good was a sausage without a man?

Even more worryingly, no one was shooting at him. 'No Archie?' mused Biggles. 'Most queer. What sort of kite-balloon are you?' He drifted closer cautiously, ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. Yes, his instincts had been right. This was no sausage. Biggles turned for home – but then Dick hurtled past him, all guns blazing.

The shape reacted. Darkness bled from its body and slithered through the air like a monstrous tentacle. Space crinkled, hurting Biggles' eyes. Dick's plane twisted, then collapsed to nothing.

Biggles roared. He'd seen hundreds of planes shot down, but this was different. This monster had killed the lovely lad with whom he'd spent the previous evening! There was no sweeter Dick in all of France! Biggles wheeled back towards the sausage as his fists closed on the Bowden lever of his guns. He should have fled, but no supernatural entity killed a lovable lad without answering to Squadron-Leader Bigglesworth!

Impossible colours reached for Biggles' plane. He spun around them and spat out a line of tracer bullets, but his Camel went into an uncontrollable dive.

Biggles tugged his control-stick, but for once it was loose and unresponsive in his hand. His plane was pointing straight down and accelerating. He tried to level out, but his engines weren't responding and he could only glide. Was there anywhere safe to land below? He had no hope of reaching No Man's Land, let alone the British Lines, so the best he could do was aim for a patch of woods. If he survived a crash-landing there, perhaps he could stay hidden in the trees and eventually get back to

Maranique on foot.

An explosion shook his plane. Ah, yes. He'd been wondering when the Boche would notice him. Anti-aircraft fire turned the air black, while a crackling warned him that he was within range of their ground-based machine-guns. Biggles spied a river and headed for it. With every second, the objects on the ground became larger and better defined. The impression of a toy landscape disappeared. Suddenly the world was screaming past. A monstrous oak appeared from nowhere and nearly clipped Biggles' right wing. The only mercy was that the machine-gunners could no longer see him.

The Camel hit the river and smashed.

Water was in Biggles' mouth and someone was pulling him from the river. Through smarting eyes, he saw a big man with a pencil moustache. Oddly, he didn't seem to be wearing a German uniform.

'You got a busted head,' said the man with an American accent. Biggles was dragged to the bank and bandaged. 'Hey, Doc! What news on the plane?'

'It's a Sopwith Camel!' called a pleased lad in cricket whites. 'We're in World War One!'

The American grunted. 'Joy of joys. That really a biplane?'

'It is indeed!'

This conversation puzzled Biggles, since he wouldn't have expected anyone to be this ignorant, behind German lines and still breathing. They seemed friendly, but they were surely either morons or demented. 'Awfully sorry, chaps,' Biggles interrupted, 'but what the dickens are you blithering about?'

The cricketer squelched on to dry land and offered Biggles his hand. 'Ah yes, I do apologise. I'm the Doctor and this is my friend Gus.'

'Squadron-Leader Bigglesworth,' said Biggles, giving the Doctor a firm shake. 'What are you doing here?'

'Behind enemy lines?' asked the Doctor, and then frowned. 'Mmm. Yes. All very hush-hush, I'm afraid. Angus is from the U.S. Air Force, you know.'

'True,' said Gus.

Biggles gave up. If they didn't want to tell him, so be it. The American would be mad, of course, but even lunatics were better company than the Boche. Besides, the Doctor seemed like an upstanding gentleman. 'What's the plan?'

'We check your injury,' said the Doctor firmly, and then did so. 'Yes. Good work, Gus.'

'Thanks,' said Gus shortly. 'What happened with the plane?'

'These old Sopwith Camels have machine-guns synchronised to fire through the propellers,' said the Doctor, wringing out his coat. 'It looks like something happened to the timing.'

The ensuing roar reminded Biggles somewhat of an exploding kite-balloon. Gus was amused. 'Of all the pinheaded, dumb as a...' he managed to say, then collapsed in helpless hysterics. Eventually he wiped the tears from his eyes and picked himself up from the ground. 'No offence, but that can't be for real. Tell me you're kidding.'

Biggles was about to ejaculate, but the Doctor spoke first. 'It's normally quite effective. In our universe it was still being used on Spitfires in World War Two.'

'Our universe?' asked Biggles, but was ignored. Gus was on a roll.

'I hope they got great parachutes!'

'Actually they don't. British planes didn't carry them. A few German pilots were allowed parachutes in 1918, but it's said that the British authorities believed giving parachutes to their men would encourage cowardice.'

Gus threw his hands in the air. 'What kind of parallel universe is this?'

'The real one.'

'Says you!'

'Excuse me?' said Biggles, reminding himself that one didn't punch out a man who'd saved your life. Besides, the chap was American and one had to show sympathy to the unfortunate. 'Did any of the above translate into English?'

'You're a braver man than me,' said Gus to Biggles.

'Probably,' Biggles agreed, 'but might I suggest continuing our chinwag elsewhere? You obviously haven't noticed, but we're behind the German Lines and standing beside a downed British crate. Half the Boche army seemed to be shooting at me as I came down. In a few minutes we'll probably have a Jerry platoon in our laps.'

'The TARDIS?' asked Gus.

'The TARDIS,' agreed the Doctor.

'The TARDIS?' echoed Biggles. Was this some code word?

'Get ready,' said Gus, lifting Biggles to his feet. Beneath the trees was a blue box, into which the Doctor led them. Inside there should have been a cupboard-sized space, but instead Biggles found himself in an impossibly vast cavern of blinking lights and whiteness. Circles lined the walls. A red lever was pressed and the doors hummed shut.

'What the deuce?' Biggles ejaculated, which appeared to irritate Gus.

'Speak English, why don't you?'

'From Ohio,' muttered the Doctor in apology.

'And proud of it!'

Biggles wasn't interested in the breeding of Americans. 'What is this place?'

The Doctor beamed; clearly that had been the right question to ask. 'This is my ship. You and Gus are pilots, flying fighter pilots in your respective World Wars, but this is a rather more special craft. My TARDIS flies through time and space.'

Biggles looked around and decided not to argue. 'Where can you go?'

'Anywhere,' said the Doctor.

'In that case,' said Biggles, 'could we nip up about twelve thousand feet?'

The Doctor frowned, but twisted a control on the console. Pictures came alive on a wall, displaying a moving image of the monstrosity that had brought down Biggles' plane. 'You mean that?'

Gus started. 'Holy cow!'

'Quite,' said Biggles. 'That's the fellow I meant. What is it?'

The Doctor hesitated for a moment, then smiled like a naughty schoolboy and started pressing buttons on the console. 'Only one way to find out!' With a flourish he pressed the final switch, then a central column started to rise and fall. The monster's picture on the wall grew larger, seeming to reach for them as they approached. That sensation of crinkling space returned for Biggles as the wall fragmented. Strange colours bled into the air of the console room. Walls crinkled, then seemed to recede in directions other than the three Biggles knew. The calm whiteness of the TARDIS became a shimmering darkness of tortured dimensions.

'Okay, that's close enough,' said Gus. 'Curiosity satisfied, time to go.'

'Is it a German trap?' asked Biggles.

'Some kind of dimensional anomaly,' said the Doctor happily. His arms were folded as he watched the chaos spreading around him. Colours crawled into Biggles' eyes and twisted them. The monster's image on the wall now seemed more real than the room he stood in, as if it had become three-dimensional while the rest of the world was merely an artist's impression. Biggles studied his hand, convinced that it normally had more depth than that. He tried to wiggle his fingers and nearly vomited.

'I said, let's turn back,' said Gus. 'Hello? Earth calling Doctor?'

'We're being dimensionally reduced,' said the Doctor as if this explained everything.

'Is that a good thing?' asked Biggles.

'Only if you like being crushed to a singularity.'

'That's a no?' said Gus.

'Singularities are doorways. This is the way we pass throooo…'

All air was expelled from Biggles' lungs as topology became incompatible with a respiratory system. Biggles fell to his knees, gasping like a fish. His heart was thumping as his blood vessels tried to burst. He tried to close his eyes against the horrors of this fractured world, but couldn't even manage that. Had his eyelids been destroyed, or could they no longer stretch to cover his eyes? He tried to turn his head, succeeded and then regretted it. At right angles to reality were things he would have given his life not to have seen; he screamed, but no sound emerged.

'That's better,' said the Doctor, as if nothing was wrong. 'Interesting.'

Biggles' consciousness was slipping away. He tried to attract the Doctor's attention, but his body was no longer under his control.

'Oh dear.' Someone dragged Biggles back into the relative safety of the TARDIS, infected and distorted but still a recognisable caricature of its former self. A monster's face looked into his, but on a second

view it proved to be the Doctor.

'?' said Biggles.

'Sorry about that,' said the Doctor. 'Some of us have more dimensions to... Well, yes.'

'!' said Biggles.

'Don't worry. We're approaching a dimension-space in which humans can exist.'

Space filled out and the TARDIS expanded back to its normal self. The Doctor twisted and became merely the young blond cricketer he'd always been. Biggles inspected himself and found himself breathing, physically intact and still carrying his gun.

'Are you two okay?' asked the Doctor.

'Just peachy,' said Gus.

The Doctor beamed, unrolled his hat and headed for the door. 'That was fun, wasn't it? Obviously, something's affecting the dimensions, so all things considered, I think we'd better do something about it.'

Biggles had known it all along. 'A German trap.'

'Maybe,' said the Doctor, after a hesitation.

'Can we breathe out there?' asked Gus, clearly hoping the answer would be "no".

The Doctor opened the doors and strolled outside. Biggles and Gus waited, arms folded. 'Yes,' was the eventual reply, so they reluctantly followed him. The Doctor was leaning against the TARDIS, his hands in his pockets, and peering into featureless gloom. 'Rather disappointing, isn't it?'

'YAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" was the reply from Gus and Biggles.

They were in a void. With nothing underfoot, Biggles grabbed at nothing and went head over heels in a crawling somersault. What was this? It was like night flying through cloud, but worse.

'This isn't real,' said Gus, clinging to the TARDIS. 'Why can we breathe? Where's the air coming from?'

'I think the real world is infecting this dimension space,' said the Doctor. 'Just like its otherworldly dimensions were bleeding into the sky over France.'

Biggles ignored their babble as he tumbled through the void. What was this place? If the TARDIS had brought them here, then perhaps the vanished planes might be here too. Biggles had thought his friend was dead, but now his heart leapt at the possibility of getting Dick! If he could find a plane, he could beetle off on a proper search. It didn't have to be a Sopwith Camel. Dash it, even a German Hannoverana would do. Biggles wouldn't have said no to a quick Fokker, either.

Shadowy outlines loomed in the fog. 'I think I see planes!' he shouted back to the others, itching to get his hands on a firm control-rod. 'How do we reach them?'

'Simple,' called back the Doctor. Biggles looked back through the mist and saw him push off from the TARDIS into the void. His disembodied voice drifted back. 'See you in a jiffy!'

'Looks easy enough,' said Biggles, wondering how he could return to the TARDIS. Gus was still clinging there. 'Fancy a spot of aviation, old bean?'

'In a biplane?'

'They work,' said Biggles acidly.

'Says the guy who shot off his propeller.'

Biggles sighed. 'You know, Gussie, beneath its archaic and humorous exterior, the dear old Camel is actually quite efficient. Obviously its primary purpose is to provide amusement for visiting Yanks, but in its idle moments it's been known to take flight and even shoot down the odd enemy machine. You might be surprised to hear this, but usually its prop stays on its shaft. Personally I'd guess the cause was these altered dimensions, eh?'

'Sure,' Gus grunted. This was probably his idea of an apology.

'So you're in?'

Gus seemed to make a face, though by now Biggles could hardly see him. 'Guess so.'

'Top-hole! Whoever finds a plane first returns for the other, right?' There was no reply; the TARDIS and Gus had now disappeared completely. Hoping for the best, Biggles drifted nearer to the shapes he'd seen before. Those were definitely planes. 'Hold hard, Dick. I'm coming!'

'Zat's vot you think, Britisher svine!'

From nowhere roared a black-crossed enemy machine with a twin tailplane, clearly a Hannoverana. Machine-gun bullets sliced through the fog around Biggles, and then the plane disappeared again. Biggles nodded. He'd known the Germans would be behind all this!

As he drifted, a shape faded into view with painful slowness. It was a plane, an S.E.5. Biggles nearly went past it, but a wing strut came within reach and he pulled himself in. He climbed into the cockpit and started up, thus commencing the most incredible dogfight of his life. He only just evaded his enemy's second pass. The unusual conditions made him loop the loop, but he soon gained control and flew off in pursuit of his foe. It was like flying through a nightmare. Abandoned machines appeared from nowhere like ghosts, while at any moment he expected to hear an enemy on his tail. His eyes ached from peering into the fog, but for once, his ears were active too. The silence here was so complete that you could hear your enemy over the thundering of your own engine.

A phantom dived across his bows and he sent some tracer bullets after it. 'Hey!' yelled Gus's voice. Biggles caught up and flew alongside him.

'Why the blinking blue Hades choose a Hannoverana? That's what our enemy's flying!'

Gus's reply could have scorched paint. 'If you expect me to tell the difference between these antiques and a crate of oranges…'

Another Hannoverana dived past them, and the fight was on.

Gus lasted about forty seconds. He turned too slowly, and the German's bullets took out his engine. Already, their advantage of numbers was gone. As Gus drifted uselessly, Biggles sent a desperate burst of fire after their opponent – but too late. Already the German had dived for speed and was zooming up behind Biggles' tail. Soon, they were chasing each other in a circle, each machine striving to get behind the other.

It was clear that this man was no rookie. The German was a top flyer, but he was also more used to these conditions. For a while, Biggles held his own, even getting in the odd burst of fire, but he knew he was being outmanoeuvred. Dizzy with the strain, he jerked his control-stick back in a lightning turn that should have given him a couple of seconds to get in a shot. To his shock, the German had anticipated him. Bullets sliced across his plane.

His engine was intact, but his guns were now useless. Biggles threw the S.E.5 into a desperate series of twists and turns, using every trick he knew. Nothing worked. Bullets smashed into his plane again, making it spin crazily.

There was just one hope. Back in the French skies, it would have been suicide, but Biggles flipped his plane onto its back, and flew head-on at his enemy.

Bullets smashed his plane and killed the engine, but sheer momentum kept it moving. Too late the German realised that there was no gravity to send a defeated enemy spiralling down to the ground. Biggles braced himself for impact, and then the planes collided.

Biggles had never known such an impact. It took him a few moments to decide that he was not dead, especially given the condition of the two machines. The Hannoverana's engine had carved open its housing and torn the plane to shreds, while Biggles' S.E.5 was scarcely in better shape. Amazingly, no limbs were broken. Biggles kicked at the wreckage pinning him down, and eventually freed himself from the plane's crushed cockpit. There was blood on his face, but he felt he had been lucky.

'Help!' came a voice.

Biggles drew his gun and aimed it at what he could see of the German. 'On the contrary, I think I'll shoot you like a dog.'

'Wait, wait!' said the German. 'Biggles, you can't kill me!'

It was the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen! Leader of the 11th Chasing Squadron, he was the most feared pilot in the war with eighty British kills. Only 26 years old, he looked even younger. The Baron was a pretty lad with blue eyes and a boyish air. His jackboots, leather trousers and wool-lined jacket looked good on him, especially the rakishly upturned collar. If not for this dashed war, Biggles might have been his friend.

However his duty was clear. 'You violated the rules of war. You used dimensions to, um… do something.'

'I claim my rights as a prisoner of war.' Richthofen's hands were busy, half-hidden in his Hannoverana's cockpit. Was he going for a gun? The man had to die.

Biggles' weapon was hot in his hand, but he couldn't shoot! What was wrong with him? 'How did you do the dimension thing?' he asked, knowing even as he spoke that he prevaricated.

'My darling Bigglesworth,' said Richthofen smoothly, which were to be his last words. Three bullets

turned his head to Bolognese, and made the Hannoverana look even more disgusting than it did already. As bone shards drifted into the fog and Biggles' world fell apart, Gus holstered his gun.

'What's with it, Squadron-Leader? You nearly let him plug you!'

Biggles cleared his throat, not sure how to answer that. 'Yes, well. Honouring the defeated foe!' Gus made an indeterminate noise, with undertones. 'It just seemed,' Biggles continued, 'sort of, um...'

'I said "right",' said Gus incorrectly. 'Hey - you there, Doc?'

'I'LL BE WITH YOU SHORTLY.'

Biggles nearly put a bullet in his foot. '*What?*'

Gus pointed at something Biggles couldn't see. 'I think it's a spaceship.'

'Oh, of course. Silly me.'

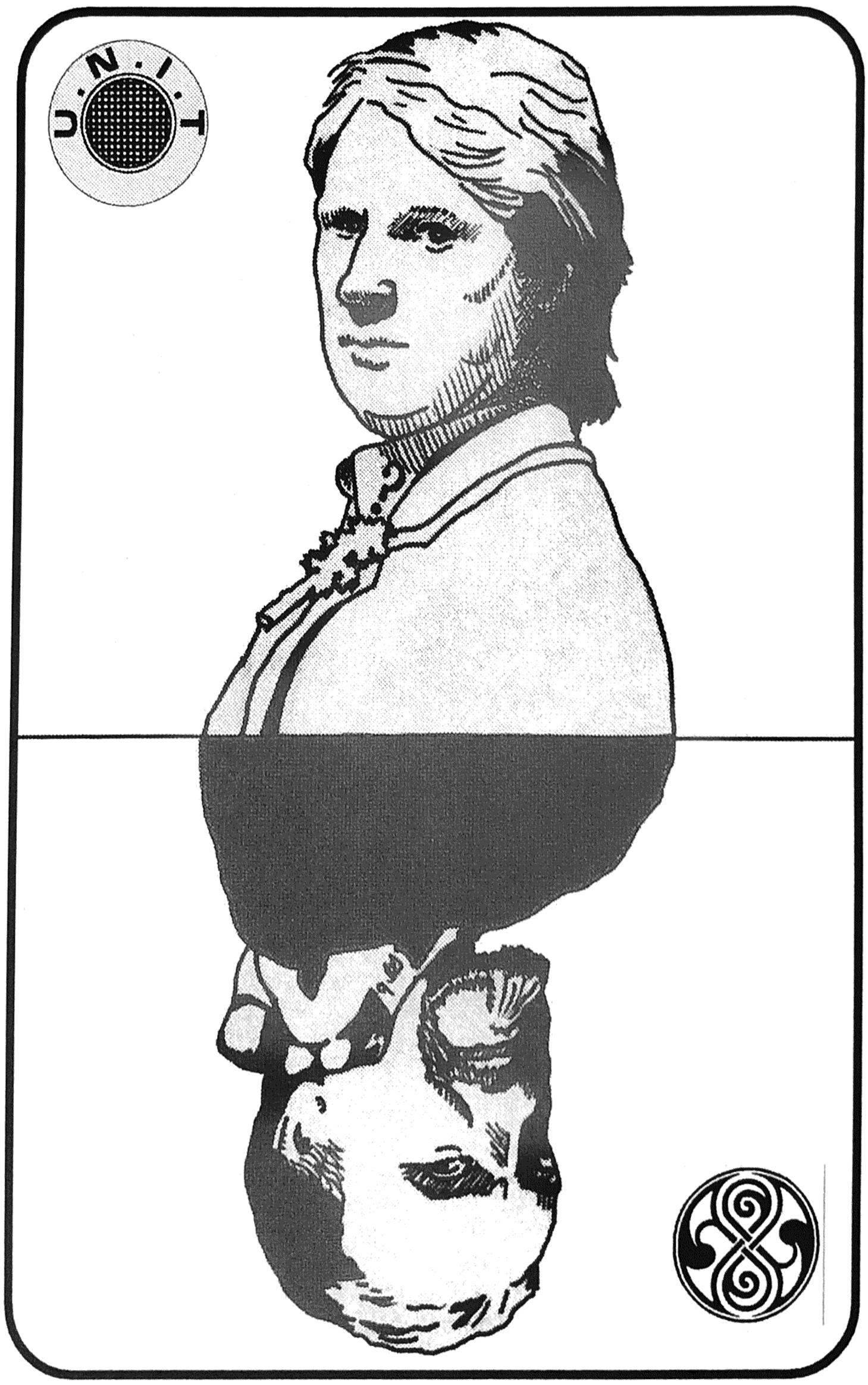
'WELL DONE, GUS. YES, THIS CRUISER CAUSED ALL THE TROUBLE. THERE WAS A DIMENSIONAL INCIDENT LEAVING HYPERSPACE, LETTING VON RICHTHOFEN FIND HIS WAY HERE. YOU CAN GUESS THE REST.'

'You're talking nonsense again,' said Gus.

There was a pause. 'DID YOU JUST KILL VON RICHTHOFEN?'

'Yup.'

A sigh came over the ship's loudspeakers. 'YOU REALISE, THIS ISN'T HOW HISTORY'S SUPPOSED TO GO? WELL, WE'LL SORT SOMETHING OUT...'



Mercy

by Kelly Hale

MERCY, THE WAY

Ain't so bad minding Spider Baby. Mostly she just skitter around and I chase after her. Sometimes she fall to sleep up there in the rafters and then her limbs go loose and she drop. If'n I don't catch her 'fore she hit the floor she put up a terrible fuss. The screeching o' Spider Baby call Holy Man back from his travels and he don't like being waked up harsh like that. Least ways, he used to not like it. Ain't much o' nothing can wake him these days.

Holy Man harder to look after in a way, though he don't move much. He away from his body most the time. Ain't suppose to touch Holy Man when he away from his body. Sackra-leejgess what the Minders say. That mean he so holy my touch could make him unholy. He never say such to me though. He got a blustery way when it come to other matters, yet he don't make much of his being holy, that certain. But he ain't spoke a word, ain't moved for nigh on a week now. I know ways o' the Holy is different. Don't need food, nor drink when they wandering the Spirit. But I worry he can't find his way back.

Must be terrible wonderful to travel though, even if it only in spirit. See something...anything 'sides this cabin. These walls. I don't know. 'Spect I never will.

Holy Man found me in the woods after the Goodoldboys done to me what they done. He weren't afraid to touch me though I been defiled. He a big man with a big belly and a big voice. The Devil like that too. Big and strong and fair o' face. But I don't believe Holy Man a fallen angel. Didn't scare me like them Goodoldboys, or like the Minders do, though they mean to be kind. He say what happen weren't no fault o' mine no matter what my Pa say. The Whole Everything is a big place he tell me. And I still Am even if some folks say I Ain't. I want to believe him. But it powerful hard to believe it now when he ain't saying it all the time, when his body just laying on the floor, with his Self gone off, searching the whole o' the Whole for I don't know what.

Spider Baby his. She ain't a pet though. I think she like his spirit helper. Only she a baby what got extra arms and legs. She don't grow much. Some babies don't. Ain't learned to talk, neither. But the twins never learn more'n grunts and squeals theyselves and they be eight years old come winter. Even so, I try to learn Spider Baby words sometimes. She sit there, limbs a'twitching, just watching my mouth move with her big, big eyes. Cock her head so, and her little brow pinch together like she listening hard, trying to remember something she already know. But after a while she laughs and starts to running 'round the cabin - up the walls she go, 'cross the ceiling and down t'other wall and 'cross the floor. Over and over 'til she wear out. Then she jump on my lap and hug me with her whole self afterwards. I don't mind. I like it. Cuz nobody supposed to touch me neither. That's on account o' how I ain't a real person no more – but I ain't no devil. Think I'd know if'n I was.

Anyhow, all that talk o' his 'bout me and the Whole Everything was 'fore Spider Baby show up. Back when he still had hope. I 'spect she were much different from what he recollect. Seen it in his eyes when the Minders fetched her to him. She catched sight o' him and ran real fast 'cross the dirt, climbed right up his pant legs. The look on his face – well, I got no words for that kind of awful. But to her it was just like she home. She curl herself 'round his neck, spindly arms and legs dangling over his shoulders. She was so happy, gurgling and patting his cheeks. She got a real pretty face, Spider Baby.

He stood like so, letting her pull his hair and squeeze his nose, but he was crying real quiet like. I felt terrible bad for him, even though she didn't seem to know or mind she weren't the same. Then he got real mad. He start hollering and heavin' hisself to and fro like some big ol' bull. He gonna search the Whole Everything for them sons o' bitches what changed his Spider Baby from what she was to what she is. But I don't know what she was 'fore this. I don't know why he so unhappy. She a sweet little thing and look a'right to me.

Holy Man got hisself some kind o' magic wagon or cart or somesuch. I ain't seen it and he can't get

to it so it don't matter. Minders say ain't no way for him to leave the same way he come. There ain't no way to leave Mercy and take your body with you. So he start leaving without it.

Now Holy Man near wasted away. I hope he find what he looking for soon. He don't stop traveling, won't have a body to come back to.

MERCY, THE PLACE

Peri stumbled along side the Doctor barely aware of the subtle changes in the surrounding woodlands, the thinning vegetation and felled trees, a footbridge over a stream of muddy water or the curl of smoke from a chimney. She was only aware of the growing stench, and the fact that heading towards it was so *not* the direction she wanted to go, that the sudden appearance of the cause of it – the shantytown – took her by surprise. For a few moments the odors took a backseat to the assault upon her other senses.

Next to her, the Doctor cradled the unconscious girl in his arms protectively and gazed about, his normally arrogant demeanor diminished by an obvious effort not to react with horror and/or revulsion. All around, the sickening thrum of insects feasting lazily upon a banquet of open sores and raw sewage.

Peri focused her attention on the central building, apparently the locus of civilization – a shack with the hand painted legend "Bremmer's General Store" suspended from rusty S-hooks above the door. Two men she quickly dubbed Brother Daddy and Uncle Gramps stopped the motion of their rocking chairs on the mud-encrusted porch so they could stare at her and the Doctor more intensely. One man had only a single eye, pale and oozing, which nevertheless managed to fix its attention on her bare thighs. Farther down on the porch a couple of boys with identical mongoloid features stopped swinging their stubby legs from the ledge and began to emit high-pitched grunts of mingled panic and delight. Their excitement brought a woman to the screen door of the shack. She was dressed in a faded print dress stretched tight over a pregnant belly. Patches of hair in some indistinct shade between dirty and blonde fought for dominion over her scab-encrusted scalp, like weeds in tarmac. She looked slowly at the grunting boys, then at the strangers. An emotion fluttered up, a veil in a breeze revealing a moment of sorrow and recognition before falling over a dull expression. Then suddenly a flipper of flesh fanned out from the woman's shoulder socket and Peri gagged. The flipper quivered briefly before collapsing back against the woman's side. "Lijah," the woman said. "Best get on out here. Devil's come a'callin."

"Oh my God," Peri whispered, "it's like a Twilight Zone version of Deliverance."

Either the Doctor thought the reference apt or he didn't catch it at all. But his lack of a bombastic response did nothing to quell her growing her anxiety.

"Contaminated water or toxic chemicals ingested during pregnancy possibly," he mused.

"Inbred if you ask me."

"I didn't," he snapped.

Yeah. Okay. That was much better. Asshole.

He shifted the weight of the burden in his arms. "We'll just hand this child over to her family thereby earning their trust and thus enabling me to address the cause of their problems and apply my usual finesse in solving them."

"More likely you'll be introduced to a local custom they like to call 'squeal like a pig, fat guy,'" she shot back.

He opened his mouth to deliver a caustic retort, but at that moment the screen door flew open. A man with a shovel stepped onto the porch. His face was lopsided, one eye sitting low and back toward his right ear so that he had to constantly oscillate his head to give them the menacing glare the shovel was meant to emphasize.

Peri saw a little bead of sweat roll down the side of the Doctor's face as he flashed what he hoped was his most ingratiating smile ever. "Hello. I'm the Doctor and this is my friend P—"

"You ain't welcome here."

"—my friend Peri. We found this child in the woods not far from here. She's suffering from a shock of some kind and we were thinking she might—"

"I said ye ain't welcome here, devil," the man said. He coughed up a wad of phlegm and projected it in their vicinity. The Doctor jumped back, both alarmed and impressed by the man's aim. "That's right. Get back, Satan. You and yer naked whore won't find no takers here."

"Hey!" Peri protested.

"Oh, tush. She's hardly naked and she's not my—wait. Oh. Oh dear. No, no my good man, I assure you I have no truck with that nasty fellow—"

"Satan got hisself a fair face. Think we don't know that?" He stepped down from the porch. The rocking chair men rose and moved to flank him. "Think you can fool us, the *chosen*, with yer fancy clothes and lying smile?"

"Oh for heaven's sake! I'm not trying to fool anyone." The Doctor dipped his chin at the girl in his arms. "We found her! If she isn't one of you then we'll—" He broke off as the pregnant woman appeared, a ghost through the torn mesh of the door.

Something in her posture, resignation in repose, eyes furtive on the unconscious girl he held, seemed to trigger comprehension.

"Oh, I see. Not one of you any longer, is that it? A pariah of sorts." He glanced at his burden again with tender, compassionate regard, and Peri saw for the first time what he saw in that face - every abandoned, misunderstood child *everywhere*. When he looked up again she sighed. He was wearing *that* expression – the dangerous, calm, nothing-I-like-better-than-challenging-the-status quo expression. His voice was as seductive as any devil's.

"Is this your little girl, madam? Do you want your child back?"

The flipper arm snapped out, trembling like a leaf before the woman retreated back into the interior darkness.

The man with the lopsided face took a step towards them, his hands gripping the shovel's handle more tightly. "Get back t'where y'come from! Get back, Satan. Get back, Satan."

Brother Daddy and Uncle Gramps took up the chant, their voices low. And from everywhere, all around them, other voices joined in.

"Shit, oh shit," Peri said. "They're coming out of the woodwork." One by one, diseased and deformed men, women, and children began to trickle from doorways, slither from under sagging porches, and limp out from the narrow muddy walkways between shacks. Scabby, leprous, with half formed limbs or extra ones, murderous, righteous determination on each and every face as they picked up boards, pitchforks, rolling pins, or frying pans chanting, "Get back Satan, get back Satan, get back Satan—"

"There's no need for this!" the Doctor shouted. "I can help you. All of you!"

But his words were swallowed up by heat and fear.

So they ran, back into the woods, back to the TARDIS and the glade where they'd found the girl, stumbling, falling and getting up at run, until they realized no one followed, never realizing that no one would.

The Doctor laid the girl on a bare patch of ground and sat down beside her. He smoothed her hair back from her forehead, while Peri paced, shivering in the humid heat.

"This is creepy. Really creepy."

"Your considered analysis of the situation is, as usual, not particularly helpful," he said. But his tone lacked any serious bite. She crouched down next to him, studying the young face. The girl looked about twelve, barely pubescent, her brow slightly knitted even in her strange unconscious-state. Beneath papery eyelids with their fringe of pale lashes, her eyes moved, dreaming.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing as far as I can tell. Maybe that's the problem."

"Why won't she wake up?"

"I imagine she will when she's ready. Something significant has happened to her, I don't doubt that."

Images from books and movies were showing dirty pictures in her head. All Deep South, Back Woods, Good Old Boys stuff. Clichés, she knew, but she could practically hear the hyena laughs of slack-jawed yokels doing nasty things to little girls like this one.

"You don't think she was…I mean she hasn't been…"

"What?" he asked, for once seeming to think she could lend insight he was missing.

Jeez, did she really have to spell it out for him? "You know…" she offered lamely.

"If I knew I wouldn't bother asking *you*!"

Not for the first time in her association with the Doctor did Peri wonder just what kind of world he came from. Monsters, aliens, staving off planetary destruction were all in a day's work he claimed, but a mundane atrocity like rape never occurred to him? Yet for some reason she couldn't bring herself to name the possibility out loud. Childish superstition told her that if she didn't say the word, it would remain the one thing that *couldn't* happen to her while she traveled with him. She took a deep breath and released it slowly.

"Nothing. Never mind," she said. His expression became momentarily thoughtful, distracted even. In the next instant, to her everlasting shock, he'd pushed the girl's dress up to her waist for a quick examination.

Peri was standing with her arms crossed over her chest, looking anywhere *but*, when she felt the air constrict around her.

The Doctor smoothed the ragged frock back down over the girl's legs and said, "No sign of assault of any kind. In fact, there is absolutely nothing physically wrong with this child at all. No trauma, no internal injuries that I can tell, nothing a bath couldn't fix. She's in perfect—"

The snap and the ensuing silence popped his ears. He was on his feet in a frantic instant. Around the glade, elms, ferns and berry brambles shimmered in the heat, but there was nothing he could see, nothing there. There was however, an empty space where Peri had been standing.

Spider Baby sense something amiss, I 'spect. She been very busy this morning. Can't hardly keep her still. She won't let me rock her or nothing. She fall from the ceiling on purpose three times just to hear herself cry. Most like so's he'd hear and wake up. First time she starts to screaming, Holy Man give a little twitch, the second time, nothing. The third time less then nothing. Now Spider Baby all wore out. She asleep on the woodpile.

I take the little mirror the Minders give me and hold it close to his lips and nose. Hardly a mist on the surface to show he still breathing. Suppose to call the Minders if I don't see no mist on the mirror. My hand shakes cuz it such a little mist.

Who can call Holy Man back t'home if his own Spider Baby can't even do it?

I ain't supposed to touch him, but I got to. Minders ain't been with him much as me. They don't know how long it been since he was back. I want to take his shoulders and rattle his bones 'til he come back fighting mad. But I don't. My hand hover like a dragonfly over the mist from his lips. Float over his mouth and chin and down, down. He got a heart here and then another one there. My hand alights twixt the two. 'Tween them is where his Self will come when it come. I don't know how I know this, but I do. Will I feel it when it come? Or will his body pop 'neath my palm like sparks from a fire? Will he blow away like ash?

I press down. Not hard. Just a bit.

The Doctor spent the next few hours circling the outlying woodlands, always coming back to the glade where the girl lay in her strange sleep. The shadows had grown longer and were fading into dusk when the Minders came.

Nothing.

A one-room cabin, snug and clean. The tar in the pine logs oozed in the heat and lent an almost antiseptic quality to the air inside. He'd carried the girl himself to the cabin, not trusting her to the machines that herded him through the woods. Though draped in hooded robes that hid their features these could not disguise the way they moved – cybernetic constructs linked to a system or possibly robots with limited autonomous programming. Their computer-generated voices were modulated to be soothing which only served to grate on his nerves.

"You are safe here. No one will harm you."

"How comforting." He laid the girl on the cot and demanded for the tenth time, "Where is my friend?" hoping for a different answer, dreading the same one.

"She is with God now," the robots answered, their voices harmonizing eerily.

"What does that mean?" he cried. "Is she dead? Is she with a friend of yours goes by the name

God? *Where is she?*"

"Goodoldboys," came a small croaking voice from the cot. He turned and saw the girl's eyelashes moving in soft shadows over her cheeks as she blinked up at the ceiling. "Minders mean she been taken by Goodoldboys."

"Well, hello." He kept the tone of his voice soft and bright. "I must say I'm very happy to see your eyes open at last." He pulled the cane rocker around to face her and sat, turning his back on the things she called Minders. "I'm the Doctor, by the way."

"You ain't. I can tell."

"I am the Doctor. Really."

"Doctors is all Goodoldboys and you ain't."

"No I ai—am not. But how do you know this?"

"Minders know. Goodoldboys don't never come to Mercy. Goodoldboys bring us to them."

"I see. And this world is called Mercy by your people?"

"You mean the town, farms n'such?"

"Yes."

"It's all Mercy."

"Why do the Minders call the Good Old Boys 'God'?"

"Think we don't know the difference 'tween 'em. But we do."

"Were you taken?"

She nodded still looking up at the ceiling. She blinked again. A huge teardrop rolled down the side of her face.

"Well then, you needn't call me Doctor if you'd rather not. But what should I call you?"

She gave a tense little shrug and turned her face to the wall.

"You have a name you like to be called, don't you?"

"My mama named me Qualia."

"That's lovely." He smiled in spite of himself. "And very appropriate. How are you feeling, Qualia?"

Her mouth opened, and stayed opened as if waiting for the words to shape themselves on her tongue and lips. It was obvious she had no words for how she was feeling. Then she began to cry in earnest.

I miss his secret smile when he say my name. I miss his voice. I miss his hand on my cheek and—

"What has happened to this child?"

"She has been cured."

Holy Man's shirt keeping my heat from his cool. A body need to feel flesh to flesh to know it mean something. It mean something, this bag o' meat, willing to carry you 'round inside it.

He ain't burst into flames yet so I starts pushing his shirt buttons through the holes to get to the bare skin. Broad bone under the flesh, like a bridge 'tween his heart o' mercies and his heart o' reasons. It a cold place. Like the Whole Everything I reckon. Cold, but soft in it's own way. I lay my cheek 'gainst his flesh and call in my mind that he ought to come back now. I wait and listen. And it feels so nice, my cheek on his breast, rubbing the bone under the skin. I want to run my whole self over him. Just to feel. Skin to skin.

Feel like an age o' time since I touched or been touched. My mama used to rock me, stroke my hair, rub salve into the blessed sufferings that marked me as the Lord's chosen, and she'd sing. To me and the twins and the babe in her belly. My blessed suffering don't show outside no more, like it do with Spider Baby. But what's inside me now is worse than feet turned backwards or no feet a'tall. Worse than goiters or boils or hair fallin' out. What's inside me now is a big empty hole goes all the way through to nowhere and ain't nobody but me - just me, wanderin' lonesome inside my own skin.

I rest my head on Holy Man's chest and pray.

I used to pray for Mercy, the place, and Mercy, the way. But I only knew the place. The way weren't something I needed cuz I was amongst the blessed and the chosen. Now I wonder where Mercy is out there in the Whole Everything. Is that what Holy Man seeking? Or hope? Or salvation o' some kind?

Holy Man been merciful to me, but mercy – true mercy *– woulda been leaving me in the woods to die.*

From the woodpile Spider Baby give a sleepy squeak.

The features are similar. A round-cheeked baby's face, dark hair, brown eyes – an infant thing with a vaguely familiar face. The head is attached to a muscular little torso from which sprout four stubby legs, two stubby arms and then an extra set, but tiny, added like an afterthought to lend symmetry. And it squirms and wriggles, and the long prehensile toes curl, and the chubby hands clench and unclench as it holds out its too many arms to him. And he says—

"Oh…oh no."

And he says—

"No. No. No."

And he says—

Still nothing. He don't stir.

"I want an audience with God."

"This structure and occupants are under quarantine—"

"Whatever for?" He gestured at the mutant baby playing with Qualia on the floor of the cabin. "This isn't something anyone can catch! This is something that was done to her!"

"Please do not attempt to leave the structure until the quarantine has been lifted.'

"I demand an audience—"

"Please do not attempt to leave the structure—"

"I want to see your masters, NOW!"

The Minder took a step back as if startled. Then it was still, a wall between him and the door. "You have seen our masters. You have spoken with our masters."

"What?"

"Our masters – those we were built to serve - are here on Mercy. God is elsewhere. Any attempt to leave at this time will result in your death."

"If I had a penny for the number of times that threat has been held over my head—"

Come back Holy Man! You gone too far. You lost somewhere and don't even know it!

The Doctor finished smoothing the blanket he'd laid out and looked up. Qualia was watching his actions, eyes wide and nervous. She knew his making a bed for himself on the floor meant something other than sleep.

He'd questioned the Minders at length, tested the threat as much as he dared. Outside an energy web had been cast over the cabin. Deadly microbes and infectious viruses were knotted within it like beads in a net. The animals in the surrounding woodlands were warned away by a subsonic generator, but one or two of the bolder, hungrier varieties braved the sonic field nevertheless. The Doctor had watched from the door as a buck straining to reach a clump of fern fronds stiffened suddenly, then collapsed in slow motion agony as organs liquefied and came spewing from it's mouth in bloody torrents. The Minders had appeared almost instantly and sprayed the suffering creature with some kind of foam until its body was completely encased. The foam hardened and the body was carried away, to be carefully disposed of he presumed. The vermin in the cabin proliferated alarmingly after that, which delighted the Spider Baby. She was an enthusiastic hunter.

The Doctor knew he could probably leave, physically push himself through the net and return to the TARDIS where medical technologies far advanced to these would cure anything that was strong enough to latch on to his very different biology – most likely anyway. But he risked infecting others en route. He couldn't take that chance. He couldn't risk his charges inside either. So the Minders came and went through the net, bringing food in special sealed containers, carrying out the waste in different sealed containers. They had no flesh and blood to worry about.

His eyes slid away from the many-limbed baby resting sleepily in the girl's arms. He couldn't reconcile the deformed creature with the Peri he knew. He focused instead on Qualia's face, the sincerity of her concern for him. Best to address that as honestly as he could.

"I'm going on a journey now Qualia," he said. "But it is a…a spiritual journey, so my body will still be here. I may wake up once or twice, but mostly I will not be able to respond to you. You must mind the baby while I'm gone. Will you do that?" She nodded solemnly, clutching the baby closer to her chest. "No matter what happens you mustn't go outside and you mustn't let her go outside either."

He stretched himself the length of the blanket. After a few moments, the slow rhythmic breathing took him deeper and deeper, seeking the thread that seemed so tenuous of late, the umbilicus that connected him to the TARDIS and hopefully, solutions. A way out. Freedom.

I spread myself 'cross him now, like a blanket o' nettles. I dig into his belly, bite into his arms. Cuss and scream and bellow. But I can't get inside him. I can't make myself real. Spider Baby don't even wake up though I'm hollering fit to wake the dead.

COME BACK! Oh, please come back. Don't leave me here lonesome…

Once upon a time during the first wave of colonization, a little sleeper ship was lost. It drifted around for eons until, by the time it was found, the first wave of colonization had long since passed into legend and the new worlds it sought were now established old worlds with old problems and old/new diseases and a set of old/new ethics. The sleeping colonists were pristine specimens and a specimen jar world was created for them. And lo, there was much rejoicing, for when they awakened to their new world they praised the God who had brought them safely through the wilderness. They grew their own food and built their own homes and multiplied quickly. They learned to mistrust and revile the robot helpmates they had brought with them to mind the ship and help them build their new world. When deformities and disease and pestilence began to plague each new generation with alarming frequency they came to believe suffering brought them closer to God. It was true. But they never knew that their suffering was helping billions of others to live longer healthier lives.

I feel a hand brush my hair from my face. "Qualia? That you there?"

Holy Man's voice sound like some ailing treefrog. He ain't used it for so long. I hold my breath, lest I'm dreaming. He take himself a big breath of his own and let it out slow. Let it out forever slow.

"Oh," he says, after a bit. "Oh dear." He stirs 'neath me, and his belly rumbles. " What you doing there, gal? You got me all wet."

Now I'm joyful, riled up and sorrowful all at once. "I ain't sorry for it!" I holler.

"No! No reason you should be. Hush. Hush now." And he don't push me off'n him, though I been sackraleejgess and coulda made him lose his holy powers. Even if I done so, I don't care. Rather best to have his Self back in the flesh than wandering holy through the Whole Everything for all time. I weep like a child and he let me. He stroke my cheek, brush his fingers through my hair and say all kinds o' nothing 'til I'm done.

Then suddenly, Spider Baby give a screech and pop up out o' the woodpile. She on him in a blink. And oh, he put up a fuss, but she took no nevermind and he weren't serious anyhow.

Finally when we all settled in cozy, just a laying there, being alive, he say,

"Right. Well, enough of this. Come on. Up. Up. I'm getting us all out of here!"

Holy Man catch hisself a mouse. He hold it for a long time till the mouse go still. I can see its little sides moving in and out real fast, but I know it sleepin' there in his palm. Spider Baby watch it, twitchin' all over like she ready to pounce. But it so still she lose interest and go off to find some other critter. And I watch her like a hawk, so when Minder come with our food I ain't paying real close attention. But I see Holy Man out the corner o' my eye close his fist real gentle over the mouse. And he put his hand to his lips and whisper, "forgive me," and I think how that's a strange thing to be askin' a mouse – which is when Holy Man leap up I reckon and push the Minder out the door.

I turn in time to see the air outside flash hot and white. It so bright I cover my eyes and Spider Baby starts a' howling. Then all the sudden, things is different, soft and calm and so quiet, it like the very

first waking o' the world.

Spider Baby race for the door and my hand shoots out to catch a leg but too late. My scream so loud it take a while for Holy Man's words to get through.

"S'a'right,' he say, "Qualia, Qualia, s'a'right now. You can come on out."

There on the ground is what used to be a Minder all wrapped up in a cocoon o' white.

"What you done to it Holy Man?"

"Poor little mouse," he say. But that don't tell me nothin'. Spider Baby race across the clearing to a blue outhouse weren't there before. She climb up and then into a tree branch hangin' over. Holy Man say, "Leave her." Then he put a hand up to shade his eyes. He look up, down and every which way.

"Now we wait."

And we wait. And we wait. I don't know what we waitin' for, and he ain't in a mood to answer.

And then...And then, Lord help me...

A Goodoldboy show up. I reckon that what we waiting for.

"Ah," said the Doctor. "I thought that might get your attention."

The man in the white coat was furious. "You do know that unit you destroyed is quite impossible to replace."

"I imagine so. The components haven't existed for millennia. How dreadful for you. I'm sure it was much more cost effective to use the colonists' own robots to collect data from your experiments on them then to introduce one of your own to the environment, or heaven forbid, yourselves. That Web of Death thingummy will set you back a pretty penny too. Your creation?"

The man shook his head. "A colleague. He's a bit put out.'

"Poor little mouse," the Doctor said.

His obvious and genuine remorse confused the man in the white coat. "Oh, well, I'm sure he'll get over it eventually."

"It's hard to get over being dead. I know.'

"What? What are you talking about?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Who the—I'm the Doctor. And you are?"

"Boyce Alten. Doctor Alten. Searle Pharmaceutical Corporation, chemical and bioengineering research division, specializing in air born pathogens."

"Pathogens for a better tomorrow," the Doctor said, then he snapped his fingers and pointed at the fellow's lab-coat. "Hey. You're the Prozac people, am I right?"

"No," Alten replied tersely. "And you've single-handedly invalidated fifty years of research, I hope you know."

"Only fifty. Well, can't win 'em all."

"That was only on this particular mutation of this particular strain. Thank God."

"Speaking of God—"

Alten sighed. "We did not create the mythos which surrounds us, Doctor...what's your name anyway? Are you from Metagenics? Or Multi-Tech? That bastard Swope has been trying to get a hold of my blastomycosis for years."

"Do you actually think I care about your blastomycosis, Dr Alten? Do I look like that is my chief concern at the moment?"

"Well, what are doing here then?"

"I could ask you the same question, but I know the answer you'll give. You all give the same answer. You will say 'but Doctor, what we do here has saved billions of lives—"

"It has—"

"Oh shut up! You did not create the mythos, but you have ruthlessly appropriated it. And really, it's such a tedious, pathetic cliché – doctors as gods."

"Like I said. We didn't set ourselves up as such. These people brought their religion with them like hundreds of other separatist sleeper ships from the first Diaspora."

"That absolves you of NOTHING! You used their beliefs against them to serve your own purposes.

How dare you? Look what you've done to this child."

"We cured her!"

"But you gave her whatever disease inflicted her in the first place—"

"Selver Syndrome from contaminated spores of the Selver fungus. It affects four percent of the population in the Branch-Davidian planetary system. And now we believe we've found an effective treatment that works even in advanced cases!"

"But she is made an outcast. Her family has rejected her—" the Doctor broke off suddenly. "Ah. Of course this has happened before. It always happens when you cure them doesn't it? How convenient for you.

"I don't know what you mean."

The Doctor made a rude noise. "Don't insult me. What do you do with those you've cured?"

Alten swallowed, unable to meet the Doctor's eyes. "We – er, the Minders tend them."

"Until they die. And they all die."

"Everyone dies, eventually."

"Oh but I thought that was part of your mission. Helping others to live longer and more fulfilled lives. I could speculate without much mental effort. Some of them commit suicide, I'll wager. Some waste away in isolation. Perhaps a few continue to haunt their old homesteads, aching for comfort and companionship until eventually the leader of the community is forced by a conviction to whatever religious principle he or she holds dear, to put the poor creature out of its and everyone else's misery. Is that close?"

The man let out a stuttering breath, but said nothing.

"And then," the Doctor continued, "You collect the body, perform a thorough autopsy, thus confirming how effective or lasting has been the treatment and/or cure."

Alten rallied his own conviction and by the set of his shoulders the Doctor could tell it was solidifying quickly. "Look. The only reason I'm here is—"

"You drew the short straw?"

"I have an offer for you."

"Something to do with restoring my friend to me if I keep my mouth shut."

"Yes."

"Where is Peri? Where are you keeping her?"

Alten started, his eyes blinking rapidly. "How did you—"

"Oh, please. You don't think I actually believed that mutated infant was Peri?" He laughed, not a pleasant sound. Alten visibly flinched. "Obviously built from the same genetic material, but not her. I imagine it's cloned embryo, whose development was chemically altered and whose growth was accelerated with hormones."

"It's a mutogenic virus actually. Only effects clones. Clone harvesting is an important adjunct to our research—"

"And a major industry,' the Doctor added.

Alten acknowledged his assessment with a tight smile. "Yes. Naturally, a cure is vital."

"Hhhmm. Well, I can certainly see how locking a mutogenic virus in a cabin with Qualia and me would aid you in achieving that vital goal. No. No. The deal is this: My friend Peri is restored to me in pristine condition along with any biological samples you may have taken from her – that includes blood and tissue, swabs of saliva, any sort of smear, ovum, fingernail trimmings, hair follicles – everything, and I will consider keeping my mouth shut."

"We would prefer a guarantee."

"Well, I'm not giving you one! You know you can't keep me here short of killing me and I don't believe you've brought a weapon suitable to the task."

"We're not a murderers, Doctor."

"Yes, yes, I've heard it all before." He marched over to the TARDIS and took the key out of his pocket. "I intend to take Qualia with me." Behind him, Qualia made a choking sound. "If she wishes, that is."

"No," Alten said. "I can't allow that."

"You don't have a choice, Dr Alten." He unlocked the door, then turned and put a finger to his lips.

"My silence, remember?"

"But I can't reconstruct the data I lost without her. My research depends on her!"

"You are a pathetic excuse for a human being, sir, and that makes you a bad scientist." He paused for a moment, his hand on the door. "You don't even know why these people call you Good Old Boys, do you?"

Alten looked frantic, distracted, and embarrassed all at once. "We- we believe it derives from 'good bodies' or, or perhaps a-a-a reference to physical perfection, God..."

"HA!" the Doctor barked. He opened the door.

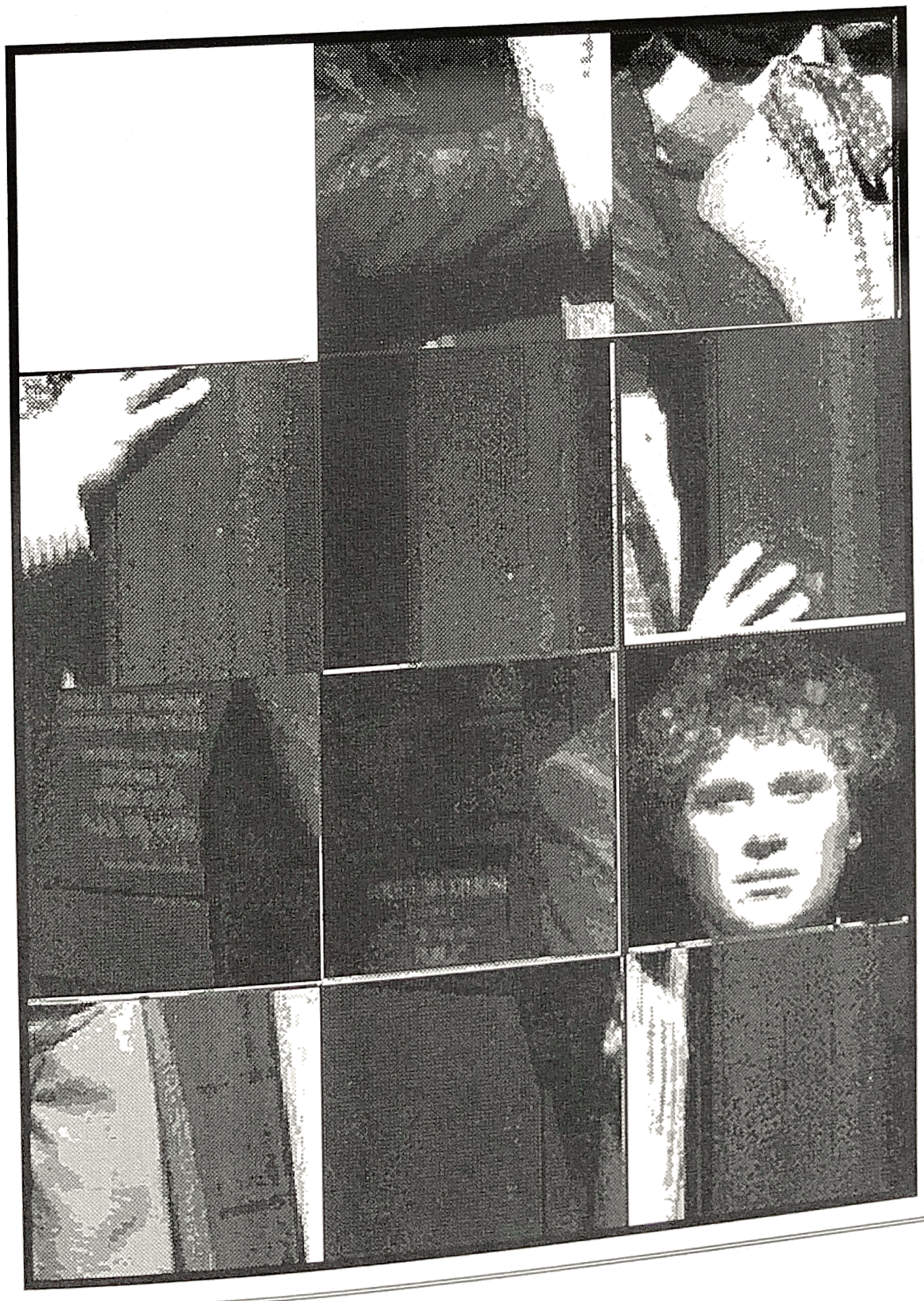
Holy Man says I's to call him Doctor now. He says his box ain't magic neither, though it's a mansion inside. Some boxes, like some people, got more inside 'em than seems like they can hold. That's how I feel now. Not sure I like it. But mebbe I get used to it someday.

I want to take Spider Baby with me, but Holy—Doctor say she'd make his friend 'uncomfortable' and she been through enough. So we left Spider Baby for my Mama to care for. She do a good job, love her like she love me once.

Doctor ain't made no real promise to keep his mouth shut. Don't think he will. Goodoldboys in a for world o' hurt, I reckon. He ain't the kind o' man you mess with more'n once.

He take me to a place where there's lots a folks been blessed and chosen. A real nice woman – Sister Marceline, she like a Minder o' folks here – say I can stay'n help with the mindin'. I don't wanna leave the Doctor, but he say it best. His life too kay-ah- tick for a girl my age. He also say this—

Mercy, the place inside my heart, will always be there, but the Way of Mercy is what I done with my life when the Lord calls me home again.



Dark Time

by John Smith

On the 5th of February 1990, script editor Andrew Cartmel wrote a letter to the author regarding his proposal for Season 27 of Doctor Who. He apologised for the delay in replying, citing that a bad script can be rejected almost instantly, but an interesting one must wait until he has time to spend on it. Quoting from the letter:

"I enjoyed "Dark Time". It's much more imaginative and science fiction literate than most of the scripts we receive. It featured good moody writing and a striking sense of imagery." After some time identifying examples of things he particularly liked, Cartmel dropped the bombshell. "On the other hand there isn't nearly enough of the Doctor and Ace in the story." "What you've got is a script dwelling on your own areas of fascination, with the occasional bit of the Doctor and Ace thrown in as a sop to viewers, and producers and script editors." At the end, Cartmel referred to the cancellation of the series: "I can't advise you to try another Doctor Who script; at the moment there are no plans for another season. If there is eventually a new season, a new script editor will be working on it." And that was that. But in a collection which celebrates the 'Might have beens' and the apocryphal story, what better than to show a glimpse from a universe where in 1990, Doctor Who's twenty-seventh season contained a story formed from the nugget below?

Synopsis

By the year 2957 the inter-quadrant Terran economy is dominated by two multinational conglomerates, DENROCHE and STIMSON-ADDLER. The DENROCHE corporation is in the middle of an investigation by the Galactic Charters Commission, charged with the exploitation of whole cluster-colonies. It does little good.

The two companies continue fighting for control of the spacing lanes, the keystone of the future economy. It is a trade war in which DENROCHE- as ever- has gained the upper hand. The company has replaced its old-fashioned and unreliable hyperdrives with an algae-based nervous system which allows a ship to 'WeaveShift' - travelling between any two points instantaneously.

The process relies upon the manipulation of a one-to-one mapping construct called the Weave, created by an all-female religious order known as Rim Webbers. The headmother of the order is old and near to death, and since WeaveShift requires at least three participants, a new apprentice - Spinnerette Roca-Yole - is being ordained to make up their number.

Unknown to them, though, the process of WeaveShift is causing a decay of quantum probability laws. The Whisper, a mysterious reality cancer which has destroyed dozens of planets in the far systems, is one of the side-effects of WeaveShift.

While Roca-Yole is going through ordination as a Rim Webber, she inadvertently transports the Doctor and Ace to the DENROCHE complex. Initially suspected of being employed by a rival company, the Doctor and Ace are soon asked to help with a series of bizarre attacks in the DENROCHE complex.

The Doctor traces them back to a pilot of one of the WeaveShifted starliners - Moderator Karl Reece - who has been hospitalised after apparently abusing his daughter.

The Doctor slowly realises that Reece is infected by a 'latent somatype', a conceptual organism which exists in the human mind as a series of random electrical impulses. Reece became a carrier for the organism during the last WeaveShift, in which his ship passed through the Dante Zone, one of the uncharted regions of WeaveSpace. Now comatose, Reece has been admitted to a ward for psychologically injured Moderators. There, using unconscious archetypes and memories from Reece's childhood, the organism has begun to construct a boy for itself - the Bachareen. Even more alarming, the organism has started to reproduce, infecting the minds of the other comatose and brain-dead patients in the ward. Then, in its composite form, its nightmare body, the Bachareen breaks out and begins destroying the complex,

The Doctor realises that it is heading for the Rim Webbers. It intends to divert a scheduled passenger-liner through the Dante Zone, infecting everyone on board with the conceptual nucleus. One of the Rim Webbers is killed fighting the Bachareen, leaving them with no choice but to ordain the Doctor into the order - a heresy since all members are female.
The operation fails and the Bachareen gains possession of two more Rim Webbers. As a last resort, the Doctor materialises the TARDIS - damaged in an earlier incident in the vortex - around the Bachareen, Trapped in the unstable shell of the TARDIS, the Doctor transports the organism back to the Dante Zone from which it came.
With WeaveShifting stopped, the probability decay stops with it. The awful spectre of The Whisper disappears from the far systems almost overnight. The DENROCHE corporation - its transportation system destroyed - becomes bankrupt almost as quickly. New evidence leads to its prosecution by the Galactic Commission, freeing the quadrants of its stranglehold.

EPISODE 1

1. EXT. STARLINER: NAVIGATION ROOM. NIGHT.

A BIG EMPTY HANGAR-LIKE ROOM IN ALMOST TOTAL DARKNESS. AS WE MOVE FORWARDS, A TINY CIRCLE OF LIGHT APPEARS IN THE DISTANCE. THIS RESOLVES INTO THE SHIP'S PILOT: REECE. HE IS SUSPENDED IN MID-AIR IN A FLIGHT HARNESS, AS IF IN SOME HUGE SENSORY DEPRIVATION TANK. HE IS WEARING A BLACK SINGLE-PIECE JUMPSUIT IDENTIFYING HIM AS THE SHIP'S PILOT, OR **MODERATOR.** THE **DENROCHE** LOGO IS EMBLAZONED ON HIS CHEST.
WE MOVE ALONG HIM AND SLOWLY CLOSE IN ON HIS FACE. HE IS RELAXED AND CALM, APPARENTLY SLEEPING. A MOMENT. THEN HIS EYES FLICK OPEN. THEY ARE THE MILKY-WHITE EYES OF A BLIND MAN. IF HE COULD SEE, HE WOULD BE STARING STRAIGHT AT US.
REECE: (SOFTLY) Bachareen.
WE PULL BACK IN JUMP CUTS. REECE CONTINUES REPEATING THE WORD AS WE MOVE AWAY, LOUDER AND LOUDER, UNTIL HE'S SCREAMING AT THE TOP OF HIS VOICE. IN THE DARKNESS IT IS A DESPERATE HEART-WRENCHING SOUND, ALMOST A PLEA.
REECE: Bachareen! **Bachareen! BACHAREEN!**

TELECINE 1:
EXT. STARLINER IN SPACE. NIGHT.
REECE'S SCREAM IS CUT OFF IN MID-FLOW.
JUMPING BACK TO AN EXTERNAL VIEW OF THE STARLINER **"Aurora Leigh"** - AN ANTIQUATED THIRD-RATE CARGO SHIP. IT IS JUST LEAVING WEAVESPACE, WARPED SLIGHTLY AS IF SEEN THROUGH DISTORTED GLASS. IN THE SECOND WE FIRST SEE IT, THE SHIP IS MADE UP OF STATIC. THEN IT REVERTS TO NORMAL AS IT ENTERS 'REAL' SPACE.
END TELECINE 1.

2. INT. MERIDIAN: CHARTULARY. NIGHT.

LOOKING DOWN INTO AN ORNATE PENTAGONAL STONE TROUGH FILLED WITH WATER: THE "WEAVEPOOL". A NETWORK OF THREADS RADIATES OUT FROM ALL FIVE SIDES IN COMPLEX SPOKES, PUTTING THE TROUGH AT THE CENTRE OF AN IMAGINARY SPIDER'S WEB. REFLECTED IN THE WATER IS THE **"Aurora Leigh"**. WE HOLD ON THE IMAGE FOR A FEW SECONDS. OFF-SCREEN THERE IS A LONG INTAKE OF BREATH AND, IN RESPONSE, THE IMAGE BREAKS UP INTO RIPPLES.
WE MOVE UP TO SEE ROCA-YOLE, IN SHADOW, STANDING OVER THE "WEAVEPOOL". SHE IS ABOUT TWENTY; AN APPRENTICE RIM WEBBER (A SPINNERETTE). SHE IS WEARING A SOMBRE GREEN AND BLACK HABIT THAT SUGGESTS A RELIGIOUS ORDER. SHE BREATHES OUT SLOWLY AS SHE LEAVES THE WEAVE-TRANCE. HER EYES ARE CLOSED.
THE LIGHTS RISE AND WE SEE THE CHARTULARY. A DARK, LOW-ROOFED ROOM, LIKE A CHAPEL OR SHRINE. IT IS FURNISHED WITH CANDELABRA; WALL HANGINGS; PIGEONHOLES FILLED WITH ROLLED CHARTS. GOLD, GREEN AND BLACK DOMINATE.

THE COBWEB OF WEAVESPOKES RADIATING OUT FROM THE TROUGH CONNECT TO FIVE RAILS SET IN A PENTAGON ABOUT FIFTEEN FEET BACK. A CAT'S-CRADLE OF THREAD LOOSELY BINDS ROCA-YOLE'S HANDS. THIS IS WOUND AROUND THE TWO PARALLEL WEAVESPOKES IN FRONT OF HER. ROCA-YOLE RELAXES HER HANDS, THEN HER BODY, AND OPENS HER EYES. TWO ELDERLY WOMEN COME IN THROUGH A DOOR AT THE BACK OF THE ROOM: STEERSMOTHER TARIEN AND ALDERMOTHER KAMEKA. THEY ARE BOTH RIM WEBBERS, VERY DIGNIFIED, WEARING DARK RED ROBES AND HEAD-DRESS. THEY HAVE THE SPIRAL RIM WEBBER SYMBOL TATTOOED ON EACH CHEEK. THEY APPROACH ROCA-YOLE, TAKING CARE NOT TO TOUCH THE WEAVESPOKES.
KAMEKA: The Shift was successful. You did well, Roca-Yole.
TARIEN: Well? She did magnificently.
KAMEKA SETS ABOUT REMOVING THE CAT'S-CRADLE FROM ROCA-YOLE'S HANDS, SNAPPING THE THREADS WITH HER FINGERS.
TARIEN: Never have I seen an apprentice handle the Weave with such subtlety, such sureness of hand. You are a true adept, Roca-Yole.
ROCA YOLE: (BOWS MODESTLY) I have been taught well, Steersmother.
TARIEN: (TO KAMEKA) Did you hear that, Kameka? Humility too.
KAMEKA: She is, as you say, an exemplary student. But a starliner is a very large craft. The Weave is already naturally stressed at that point. Removing the Heelstone from the Vortex…. That will require a more delicate touch still. There are no gravity-lines there.
TARIEN: Pay no heed to Sister Kameka's disparagement. You know by now, I hope, her heart is not as hard as she would have us think.
ROCA-YOLE: But there is truth in her words, Steersmother. I have heard that many novitiates fail to adjust to the randomness of the Vortex. Its turbulence is feared by all travellers.
KAMEKA REMOVES THE LAST OF THE THREAD FROM ROCA-YOLE'S WRISTS.
KAMEKA: It is fortunate we are not required to perform regular WeaveShift there. The strain not only on the Rim Webbers, but on the Moderators, too, would soon reduce our number.
TARIEN: And we must put the Moderators even before the cargo. Without their helmsmanship, we are so many impotent old women. (TURNS SMILING TO ROCA-YOLE) Now, let us pay a visit to Liegemother Keera-Shilt. She will have received medication by now.
THEY HEAD TOWARDS THE DOOR, ROCA-YOLE FOLLOWING HUMBLY.
KAMEKA: And the Hronoth freighter, Tarien. Do not forget we have a supply Shift scheduled.
TARIEN: I am not without wits yet, Kameka. But as you say, we must be brief. (TO ROCA-YOLE) After that, there will be three days of rest. Then, child, we shall see how you fare in the Vortex.

TELECINE 2:
EXT. THE WOODS. SMALL CLEARING. DAY.
A BRIGHT SUMMER'S DAY. WE MOVE THROUGH THE UNDERGROWTH, SLOWLY BRINGING UP MUSIC: THE GLENN MILLER/ SKIP NELSON VERSION OF **"That Old Black Magic"**.
THE MUSIC TAKES US INTO A SMALL, SUN-LIT CLEARING. THE TARDIS IS RESTING UNDER A STAND OF TREES AT THE FAR END. THE DOCTOR IS LYING IN A HAMMOCK TIED BETWEEN TWO TREES, DOZING. JACKET OFF, HAT OVER HIS FACE. A BOOK LIES OPEN ON HIS CHEST: HEIDEGGER'S **"Existence and Being"**. THERE ARE MORE BOOKS AND COMICS SCATTERED ON THE FLOOR: BRECHT, SARTRE, CAMUS, JEFFREY ARCHER, TRASHY SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS. ACE IS SITTING ON A RUG UNDER THE HAMMOCK. SHE IS LIGHTLY DRESSED, FLIPPING THROUGH A COMIC. ON THE RUG BESIDE HER IS AN OPEN (AND ALMOST EMPTY) WICKER PICNIC BASKET, A DIGITAL WATCH AND A WIND-UP GRAMOPHONE, CRACKLING OUT **"That Old Black Magic"**.
ACE GLANCES AT THE GRAMOPHONE, ANNOYED BY THE SONG, THEN TURNS BACK TO THE COMIC. SHE TRIES TO CONCENTRATE ON READING, BUT THE MUSIC DISTRACTS HER AND SHE GIVES UP. SHE IS SO IRRITATED BY THE MUSIC SHE ALMOST SNATCHES THE NEEDLE OFF THE RECORD. SHE CHECKS THE TIME ON HER WATCH, THEN LOOKS ROUND AT THE DOCTOR.

ACE: It's getting late.
THERE IS NO REPLY. SHE SIGHS AND RETURNS TO THE COMIC. SHE READS FOR A FEW SECONDS, BORED, THEN TURNS BACK TO THE DOCTOR.
ACE: Don't you think we should be going soon? We've been here six hours already. (PAUSE) It might be scenic to you, Doctor, but I'm not a tourist. I was **born** here. I've had sixteen years to get used to the scenery.
STILL NO REPLY. SHE SLAPS THE COMIC DOWN IN EXASPERATION.
ACE: It's worse than Auntie Doreen's on a Sunday. At least she had a radio. At least she **talked** to me.
SHE GETS TO HER FEET AND LOOKS DOWN AT THE DOCTOR.
ACE: Doctor, I'm bored. It's **boring** here. There's nothing to do. If this is some weird Zen exercise in-
SHE STOPS. THERE IS FURTIVE MOVEMENT FROM THE DOCTOR: AS IF IN A DREAM, HE PASSES HER A YOYO. ACE STARES AT IT WITH DISBELIEF, THEN LETS IT DROP, DISGUSTED. IT FALLS ONTO THE RUG BY THE WATCH.
ACE: Right, that's it. I'm not putting up with this any more. I'm going.
SHE STARTS TO MOVE OFF, HESITANTLY, STILL PREPARED TO BE DISSUADED.
ACE: Doctor, I'm going.
WE SEE THE DOCTOR FROM HER POINT OF VIEW, STILL DOZING. ACE SHRUGS DECISIVELY AND MARCHES OFF. SHE TURNS, ON THE EDGE OF THE CLEARING FOR THE PARTING SHOT.
ACE (SHOUTING) And I meant what I said before. You **do** sing like a goose getting its neck wrung. (LOUDER) You sing like Val Doonican in a spin drier.
SHE DISAPPEARS INTO THE TREES.
WE CUT TO THE DOCTOR. HE LIFTS HIS HAT AND PEERS OUT FROM UNDER THE BRIM, WONDERING WHAT ALL THE FUSS IS ABOUT. HE SHAKES HIS HEAD AND REPLACES THE HAT.
WE SLIDE DOWN TO THE RUG AND OVER THE BOOKS, COMICS, CRUSTS OF BREAD, TO FINISH ON THE DIGITAL WATCH. IT READS 4:38. WE HOLD FOR A MOMENT. THEN THE FIGURES FLICKER, AND THE TIME IS NOW REPLACED WITH A ROW OF FLASHING NOUGHTS,
END TELECINE 2.

3. INT. DENROCHE COMPLEX: BALLARD'S OFFICE. DAY.
LOOKING AT A VIDEO MONITOR IN CLOSE UP. A TAPED INTERVIEW IS BEING REPLAYED BUT WE ARE SO NEAR TO THE SCREEN, IT LOOKS AS IF IT'S ACTUALLY HAPPENING FOR REAL. MODERATOR REECE IS STARING OUT AT US, FACE PALE, EYES WILD, GABBLING AWAY LIKE A CHILD.
REECE: I wasn't angry. I wasn't **really** angry. It wanted me to be, but they tied me to the Cross and I died. (PLEADING) So, you see, it wasn't me. It couldn't have been, could it? **Could** it?
WE HEAR A MEDIC TALKING IN A LOW CALM VOICE, AS IF TO A CHILD.
MEDIC: (OFF) No, No, Karl, it couldn't have been you.
REECE: (INTENSE) But she said it was.
THE PICTURE FLICKERS FOR A SPLIT SECOND, AS IF HITTING A PATCH OF BAD TAPE.
REECE: She said it was and he hit me. He made me bleed.
REECE LEANS FORWARD, SMILING. HE LOWERS HIS VOICE TO A CONFIDENTIAL WHISPER.
REECE: And do you know what I did then?
MEDIC: (OFF) No, I don't, Karl. What did you do?
REECE: I skinned them.
THE SCREEN GOES BLANK AS THE MONITOR IS SWITCHED OFF. WE PULL BACK AND OPEN OUT INTO BALLARD'S OFFICE: WHITE FUNCTIONAL 30TH CENTURY CHIC. CHARTS ON THE WALL; A COMPUTER TERMINAL; METAL SCULPTURE. THE **DENROCHE** COMPANY LOGO IS CLEARLY VISIBLE, WITH ITS TAG-LINE UNDERNEATH: **'Making All The Right Moves'**.
ULLMAN IS SAT AT THE TABLE, OPPOSITE THE MONITOR. HE IS A PSYCHIATRIST: LATE FIFTIES, HEAVY-SET, FATHERLY. REECE'S FILE IS LYING OPEN IN FRONT OF HIM.
BALLARD IS PACING SLOWLY UP AND DOWN, SNATCHING GLANCES AT ULLMAN EVERY FEW SECONDS. HE'S IN HIS THIRTIES, THIN-FACED, AMBITIOUS BUT WEAK. HE'S THE ADMINISTRATOR OF THIS BRANCH OF THE **DENROCHE** COMPANY.
BALLARD: Now that isn't normal behaviour. You don't have to be a psychiatrist

to see that.
ULLMAN: No. (PAUSE) How is he now?
BALLARD: Oh, he's fine now. They all are. The problem is why they're acting like that in the first place. We had one or two cases like this when Sachtler was here, but these last few months things seem to have gone crazy. Every time a Moderator steps down it's like this.
ULLMAN: I though warp psychosis was one of the conditions they were paid to handle? (MISSES A BEAT) Everyone suffers from travel sickness. This is just a more extreme form. It's taking a little longer for the brain chemistry to recover, that's all.
BALLARD: But it shouldn't take any longer. That's why the Moderators are blind. They have the optic chiasma severed to reduce that effect. (HE INDICATES THE FILE IN FRONT OF ULLMAN) All right, so Reece was back to normal ten minutes later. But that doesn't mean it's going to be like that the next time. Guiding a ship at WeaveShift isn't like driving a car. If there's a problem there, we want it looked at before it gets any worse.
ULLMAN: Can't you reduce the number of Shifts each Moderator has to make?
BALLARD: They only do eight Shifts already. That's all you can take without going crazy. We go through five Moderators a week because the burn-out rate's so high. You can imagine what kind of expense that involves…
ULLMAN: I'm sure it would involve a lot less if there was an accident. If one of the Moderators misphased while he was Shifting a passenger-liner, say…
BALLARD: That's why the Director invited you here, Feldscher Ullman. You're the quadrant's chief advisor on stress disorders. (SMILES GRIMLY) We want you to advise us.

TELECINE 3:
EXT. THE WOODS. PARK. DAY.
ACE IS WALKING ALONG A PATH THROUGH A TOWN PARK, HEADING FOR A SMALL LODGE ADVERTISING LIGHT REFRESHMENTS. THERE IS A SERVING HATCH IN THE SIDE WITH TWO PEOPLE QUEUING FOR ICE CREAM.
A JOGGER TROTS PAST, HIS WALKMAN BUZZING TINNILY. ACE PASSES A YOUNG COUPLE SUNBATHING ON THE GRASS. SHE SMILES TO HERSELF, STARTING TO RELAX IN THE FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS.
SHE LOOKS ROUND AT THE ACTIVITY - CHILDREN PLAYING; GROUPS OF GOSSIPING PARENTS, SOME WITH PRAMS. ALONG WITH THE BACKGROUND NOISES, WE CAN HEAR WATER RUNNING THROUGHOUT THE SCENE.
ACE REACHES THE LODGE AND STANDS BY THE SERVING HATCH. THERE IS A TEENAGE BOY IN FRONT OF HER. HE PICKS A PACKET OF CRISPS UP FROM THE COUNTER AND GRINS AT ACE AS HE PASSES. SHE SMILES TO HERSELF, FLATTERED.
WE TURN BACK TO THE COUNTER, AND THE ICE CREAM VENDOR STANDING BEHIND IT. HE IS IN SHIRT SLEEVES. HE SMILES AT ACE.
ICE CREAM VENDOR: Yes, love?
ACE: A cornet and a can of coke, please.
THE ICE CREAM VENDOR MOVES OFF TOWARDS A BIG BATTERED FREEZER. WHILE HE IS SCOOPING OUT ICE CREAM, ACE LOOKS ROUND THE PARK AGAIN. WE SEE A SERIES OF SHOTS FROM HER POINT OF VIEW: AN OLD WOMAN AND HER GRANDSON STANDING BY THE LAKE, FEEDING THE DUCKS; A PLAYGROUND WITH CHILDREN ON A ROUNDABOUT, A DOG CHASING AFTER IT; A GROUP OF BOYS PLAYING WITH A FRISBEE.
ICE CREAM VENDOR: (OFF) There y'go, love.
WE RETURN TO THE ICE CREAM VENDOR. ACE PUTS A POUND COIN DOWN ON THE COUNTER.
ACE: Thanks.
SHE TAKES THE CORNET AND CAN. THE MAN MOVES TO THE TILL FOR HER CHANGE. WHILE SHE IS WAITING, ACE LOOKS PAST HIM, THROUGH THE DARKNESS AND INTO THE ROOM BEYOND - PART OF THE LIVING ROOM. THERE IS A BOY OF SIX, SAT MOTIONLESS IN FRONT OF THE TV, WATCHING IT AVIDLY. THE SCREEN IS FILLED WITH STATIC.
ACE STARES AT THIS FOR A FEW SECONDS BEFORE THE ICE CREAM VENDOR'S VOICE BRINGS

HER BACK.
ICE CREAM VENDOR: (COUNTING OUT CHANGE) Sixty-eight, seventy, eighty, ninety, a pound.
AS HE TALKS HIS VOICE BEGINS TO GROW FAINTER. FROM ACE'S POINT OF VIEW WE WATCH HIM MOUTH THE LAST FEW WORDS IN SILENCE. THE BACKGROUND SOUNDS FADE OUT WITH THE ICE CREAM VENDOR'S VOICE, UNTIL ALL WE CAN HEAR IS THE SOUND OF RUNNING WATER, EXAGGERATEDLY LOUD.
ACE'S POINT OF VIEW CHANGES. WE SEE A CLOSE UP OF THE CORNET, MELTED ICE CREAM THREADING ITS WAY OVER HER HAND.
SHE LOOKS ROUND AGAIN. WE REPEAT THE SHOTS WE SAW BEFORE FROM HER POINT OF VIEW. THIS TIME THE ACTION HAS FROZEN, AS IF TIME HAS BEEN STALLED: THE FRISBEE IS IN MID-AIR: THE DOG IS JUMPING UP AT THE STATIC ROUNDABOUT: THE GRANDMOTHER AND GRANDSON THROWING BREAD TO THE DUCKS; A MOTIONLESS BIKE.
WE RETURN TO ACE, LOOKING CONFUSED, FRIGHTENED. AS WE WATCH, THE PICTURE STARTS TO DISTORT. ACE ELONGATES IN A TILTED PERSPECTIVE, AS IF GIVING PHYSICAL FORM TO HER CONFUSION. HER HAND OPENS ABSENTLY AND THE CORNET SLIPS FROM BETWEEN HER FINGERS. WE FOLLOW IT IN SLOW MOTION AS IT HITS THE GRAVEL AT HER FEET. THE IMAGE FREEZES ON IMPACT.
ACE IS LOOKING DOWN AT THE GROUND. WE HOLD FOR A FEW SECONDS, THEN SHE RAISES HER HEAD AND LOOKS AT US. HER FACE SLACKENS WITH FEAR AS SHE REALISES WHAT IS HAPPENING.
ACE: (FRIGHTENED) Oh no…
SHE TURNS AND STARTS RUNNING BACK THE WAY SHE CAME. HER MOTION IS DISJOINTED, STRANGELY JERKY, AS IF SEEN ON A BADLY RUN FILM. THE FURTHER BACK SHE GOES THE MORE DISTORTION INCREASES.
SHE PASSES THE COUPLE SUNBATHING ON THE GRASS. THEY HAVE BECOME PLASTER MODELS OF THEIR REALS ELVES, WHITE FACELESS DUMMIES FROZEN IN AN EMBRACE.
FURTHER ALONG SHE PASSES THE WOMAN WITH A PRAM, EVEN MORE MINIMALISTIC. HER BODY IS REDUCED TO A CHICKEN WIRE FRAME, LIKE A MODELLING MAQUETTE. ACE RUNS PAST, HEADING FOR THE TREES THAT LEAD INTO THE CLEARING.
IN FRONT OF THE UNDERGROWTH, THERE IS A BOY CROUCHED DOWN LOOKING FOR HIS BALL. HE HAS BEEN REDUCED TO A BLANK TWO-DIMENSIONAL STENCIL, ALMOST LITERALLY A CARDBOARD CUT-OUT.
ACE GASPS IN SHOCK. SHE ALMOST RUNS INTO HIM, TRIPS, PICKS HERSELF UP, THEN CARRIES ON RUNNING THROUGH THE TREES.
END TELECINE 3

TELECINE 4
EXT. THE WOODS. SMALL CLEARING. DAY.
ACE EXPLODES INTO THE CLEARING, DISHEVELLED, PALE, FRIGHTENED.
ACE: Doctor! Doctor, wake up!
SHE RUNS OVER TO THE HAMMOCK, WHERE THE DOCTOR IS ALREADY STIRRING.
HE REMOVES HIS HAT AND LOOKS IRRITATED FOR A MOMENT. THEN HE REALISES THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG. HE IS SUDDENLY CONCERNED.
ACE: Oh God, it's coming… It's following me…
DOCTOR: Are you all right? Ace, what is it?
HE STOPS AND LOOKS IN THE DIRECTION ACE HAS COME FROM: THE SKY HAS DARKENED, NOW A VIOLENT BRUISED BLUE, AND A WIND IS STARTING TO RISE.
ACE STARTS TUGGING THE DOCTOR IN THE DIRECTION OF THE TARDIS.
ACE: We've got to get away from here.
BEHIND HER, THE UNDERGROWTH BEGINS TO SHIMMER THEN DISSOLVE AS IT IS SLOWLY EATEN BY THE STATIC. THE EFFECT SPREADS LIKE A STAIN.
ACE: Oh God, **please**… It's going through me. It's.. I can feel it going through me.
SHE DESERTS THE DOCTOR AND RUNS TO THE **TARDIS**, BUT IT IS LOCKED. SHE COLLAPSES AGAINST IT AND STARTS HAMMERING ON THE DOOR, ALMOST ON THE VERGE OF HYSTERIA.
ACE: Open it. Please, open it. Open it open it **open it**…
HER WORDS DISSOLVE INTO SCREAMS.

THEN THE DOCTOR IS THERE, LIFTING HER UP FROM THE FLOOR. SUPPORTING HER WEIGHT HE UNLOCKS THE TARDIS DOOR AND THEY STAGGER INSIDE.
WE PULL BACK AND SEE THE STATIC AS IT EATS ITS WAY INTO THE CLEARING, INTO THE SKY. THE WIND, NOW A GALE, BREAKS THE BOOKS AND COMICS INTO SHEETS OF PAPER, ALL TOTALLY BLANK. THEY BLOW UP AGAINST THE TARDIS, WHICH IS MAKING AN UGLY GROANING SOUND AS IT STRUGGLES TO DEMATERIALISE.
THERE IS A SUDDEN INTERNAL GRINDING, AS OF RUSTY MACHINERY, AND THE TARDIS DEMATERIALISES WITH A SHUDDER.
MOMENTS AFTERWARDS THE STATIC SPREADS OUT AND ENGULFS OUR ENTIRE FIELD OF VIEW.
END TELECINE 4.

4. INT. REECE'S APARTMENT: BEDROOM. NIGHT
OPEN WITH A CLOSE UP OF A PHOTOGRAPH ON A BEDSIDE CABINET. IT SHOWS REECE AT AN AWARD CEREMONY, IN FULL MODERATOR DRESS. HE IS SMILING PROUDLY. THERE IS A MEDAL PINNED TO HIS CHEST. STANDING BESIDE HIM IS HIS DAUGHTER, FIVE YEAR OLD LISHA. THE **DENROCHE** LOGO IS CLEARLY VISIBLE ON THE WALL BEHIND THEM. THERE IS A SMALL METAL SCULPTURE BESIDE THE PHOTOGRAPH: AN ABSTRACT CRUCIFIX.
WE PULL OUT AND OVER LISHA, ASLEEP IN BED. WE MOVE SLOWLY ACROSS THE DARK ROOM AND OVER TOWARDS THE DOOR, AJAR. WE LEAVE THE ROOM.

5. INT. REECE'S APARTMENT: HALL. NIGHT.
WE ARE IN A SHORT DARK HALL. A SAFETY RAIL LIKE THOSE FOUND IN OLD PEOPLE'S HOMES RUNS AONG ONE WALL. WE MOVE DOWN THE HALL TOWARDS THE DOOR AT THE END, IT LEADS INTO THE LOUNGE. IT IS HALF-OPEN, LIGHT SPILLING OUT ACROSS THE FLOOR. WE PICK UP SOFT AMBIENT MUZAK AS WE NEAR IT.
HALFWAY THERE WE HEAR THE CHIME OF A VIDPHONE OVER THE MUZAK, FOLLOWED BY BALLARD'S VOICE.
BALLARD: (OFF) Karl… It's Administrator Ballard. Sorry to disturb you this late, but the Director's given me a message to pass on to all Moderators. It's not just you I'm picking on. (MISSES A BEAT) Apparently the Rim Webbers are going to be trying out a new apprentice over the next couple of days, so all Shifts have been postponed.
WE MOVE THROUGH THE DOOR, BALLARD'S VOICE CONTINUING UNBROKEN.

6. INT. REECE'S APARTMENT: LOUNGE. NIGHT.
WE MOVE SLOWLY ROUND THE ROOM, FURNISHED IN RESTRAINED 30TH CENTURY STYLE. THE FLOOR IS TILED, COLD AND HARD.
THERE IS A BREAK IN BALLARD'S VOICE. IT IS SLIGHTLY LOUDER NOW, AND WE CAN HEAR IT CLEARLY AS WE EXPLORE THE ROOM.
BALLARD (OFF) Laarson's tearing his hair out, but it means you guys are on extended leave till things get back to normal. With pay, as per contract. (PAUSE) Oh. One final thing. You've probably heard about the new psy-tech we've brought in? Well, since everything's going to be on hold anyway, Laarson's got him to run routine medicals on all the staff. So if you could make it in sometime over the next few days, that'd be fine.
WE GLIDE TOWARDS THE VIDPHONE AND SETTLE ON BALLARD'S IMAGE. HE IS LOOKING OUT AT US, MAKING NO ATTEMPT TO HIDE HIS BOREDOM.
BALLARD: Comm me and let me know for sure. Thanks Karl.
THE VIDPHONE CLICK OFF. WE MOVE AWAY AND CONTINUE OUR VOYEURISTIC PROWL AROUND THE ROOM, MUZAK PLAYING QUIETLY THROUGHOUT.
WE LINGER ON A DISPLAY CABINET. AMONGST THE ORNAMENTS IS THE MEDAL WE SAW REECE WEARING IN THE PHOTOGRAPH. IT INCORPORATES THE **DENROCHE** LOGO WITH A STYLISED HAND. THERE IS A MESSAGE ENGRAVED ON THE PLAQUE BELOW IT: "The **KANEELI SHONE** - Awarded to Moderator KARL REECE for distinguished service".
WE MOVE AWAY AND FINALLY SETTLE ON A CLOSE UP OF A NEARLY EMPTY GLASS, A HAND CLOSED AROUND IT. WE MOVE UP TO TAKE IN REECE. HE IS SPRAWLED IN A CHAIR, LISTENING TO THE MUZAK. HE IS CASUALLY DRESSED, WEARING THE KIND OF DARK GLASSES

GENERALLY WORN BY THE BLIND.
WE START TO CLOSE IN ON HIS FACE. A SUDDEN SPASM GRIPS HIM AND HE TWITCHES MOMENTARILY, AS IF IN PAIN. WE CLOSE IN ON THE EYE-PIECE OF HIS GLASSES AND MOVE INTO BLACKNESS. THE MUZAK FADES AS IT SWALLOWS US UP.
WE ARE IN REECE'S MIND, EMPTY, DARK, VAST, MIRRORING THE NAVIGATION ROOM WE FIRST SAW HIM IN. THERE IS A DISTANT RUSTLING SOUND IN THE BACKGROUND, LIKE WIND OVER DRY LEAVES. WE CONTINUE INTO THE DARKNESS. SUDDENLY A BIRD EMERGES FROM NOWHERE, FLYING TOWARDS US. IT FLUTTERS OUT OF VIEW, THE SOUND OF ITS WINGS LINGERING AFTER IT.
A VOICE BEGINS, SOFT, DEEP, ALIEN. IT ECHOES SEDUCTIVELY, LIKE SOMEONE SPEAKING FROM THE BOTTOM OF A TIN WELL.
VOICE: Hush. Hush. Fall softly and not deep, little thing. We are the slow-rule-breaker. We are pariah.
FAR BACK THERE IS A SUGGESTION OF MOVEMENT. WE CAN MAKE OUT A FIGURE, VERY VAGUE. IT SEEMS TO BE A MAN CARRYING A CROSS OVER HIS SHOULDER.
VOICE: Listen. Shed your skin, your bone, little thing. Loose your name and chasten the liturgy. We are the Dwellers on the Threshold. We are the shadow in the Great Noontide. We are vast. Vast. (PAUSE) We are hungry as famine.
WE FLASH UP A SERIES OF IMAGES FROM THE FUTURE IN RAPID SUCCESSION, FILLING THE SCREEN: A DARK HOSPITAL ROOM WITH A ROW OF SPOTLIGHT BEDS; AN ORANGE BEING PEELED; AN OLD WOMAN'S HAND CLUTCHING AT BEDSHEETS; A CANDLE BEING BLOWN OUT; THE DOCTOR SCREAMING, HANDS AT HIS TEMPLES; A TV SCREEN SWAMPED BY STATIC; A GLASS SHATTERING ON TILE.
THE LAST IMAGE RETURNS US TO THE LOUNGE, AND REALITY. REECE'S GLASS IS LYING IN FRAGMENTS ON THE TILED FLOOR.
REECE HIMSELF HAS FALLEN ON HIS HANDS AND KNEES, BLINDLY FEELING HIS WAY ACROSS THE ROOM. HE IS SHOCKED, DISORIENTATED, OUTLINED IN A STRANGE GLOWING AURA; THE AIR SHIMMERS AROUND HIM AS IF SEEN THROUGH HEAT-HAZE.
HE PUTS HIS HAND INTO BROKEN GLASS. WE PULL OUT AS REECE STUMBLES AROUND, IN CONFUSION, OVERTURNING FURNITURE. HE IS WHIMPERING WITH FEAR. ABOVE THE CHAOS WE CAN HEAR HUNGRY SNARLS, LIKE DOGS TEARING AT MEAT.
WE MOVE PAST REECE AND IN ON THE DOOR LEADING TO THE HALL. REECE'S DAUGHTER, LISHA, IS STANDING THERE. SHE GAZES INTO THE ROOM IN HORROR. THE GLOW AROUND REECE HAS INTENSIFIED, ENOUGH TO THROW SHADOWS ON THE WALL BESIDE HER. THEY SUGGEST REECE IS FIGHTING SOMEONE.
LISHA: (SOFTLY) You're hurting him. Please don't. Please don't hurt him. Please… Please…
HER VOICE FALLS TO A WHISPER. THE SOUND OF DESTRUCTION STOPS SUDDENLY.
WE CLOSE IN ON LISHA, LOOKING AT HER IN HEAD SHOT. A MOMENT. THEN SHE FLINCHES, AS REECE'S HAND MOVES OUT AND TOUCHES HER FACE. HE HAS LEFT A DARK SMEAR ON HER CHEEK.
WE HEAR THE VOICE WE HEARD INSIDE REECE'S HEAD, LOUDER NOW, PLAYFUL.
VOICE: We're not hurting him, We love him. (PAUSE) We love **you**, Lisha. Come and see. Come and play with us and see…

7. INT. MERIDIAN LYCEUM. DAY.

THE LYCEUM IS A SMALL FLAGGED PILLARED COURTYARD WITH GARDENS: STONE FLOWER BEDS OVERFLOWING WITH GREENERY AND EXOTIC FRUIT.
ROCA-YOLE IS SAT ON THE LOW WALL SURROUNDING A FLOWERING GARDEN. FISH SWIM BETWEEN THE PLANTS AND A FOUNTAIN KEEPS UP A STEADY FLOW OF WATER.
ROCA-YOLE HAS HER HEAD DOWN. SHE IS PLAYING IDLY WITH A FLOWER, DEEP IN THOUGHT.
TARIEN APPEARS FROM BEHIND A PILLAR AND SHUFFLES OVER TO HER.
TARIEN: Are you ready, child? (NO REPLY) Roca-Yole?
STILL NO REPLY. TARIEN SITS ON THE EDGE OF THE POOL BESIDE ROCA-YOLE. SHE WAITS, APPEARING TO WATCH THE FISH.
TARIEN: (LIGHTLY) The fish have changed colour this morning. Carom-Leil has been feeding them kaseen fruit again.

NO REPY. TARIEN GIVES UP HER ATTEMPT AT CONVERSATION AND LOOKS AT ROCA-YOLE.
TARIEN: What is it, Roca-yole? (PAUSE) Is there something on your mind?
ROCA-YOLE: I didn't sleep last night, Sister Tarien. I couldn't sleep for worrying.
TARIEN: (SOOTHING) This is an important -
ROCA-YOLE (CUTTING IN) I haven't slept for two nights now. I'm tired all the time, and I feel… I feel so **blank**. (SHE LOOKS INTENSELY AT TARIEN, FRIGHTENED) Must I go through with this now?
TARIEN: Yes
ROCA-YOLE: But I've proved myself in every other discipline.
TARIEN: It does not matter. If you wish to become a Rim Webber you must be skilled in **all** the disciplines. You must be able to deal with any possibility, any environment. And there is none more dangerous than the Vortex.
ROCA-YOLE STANDS UP AND STARTS WALKING NERVOUSLY TO AND FRO, HER SANDALS KLIK-KLAKING ON THE STONE FLOOR. SHE LOOKS LOST, DESPERATE FOR HELP. TARIEN STAYS SEATED BUT FOLLOWS HER PROGRESS WITH HER EYES.
TARIEN: Child… I have seen this happen before. Many times an apprentice has proved herself outstanding in every field only to falter at this one.
ROCA-YOLE: (TURNING ON TARIEN) But I'm so frightened, Steersmother. And I don't understand **why**. All the way through my novitiate I have been told what a remarkable student I am. How skilfully I break Weave; how fine my instincts are. The other Spinnerettes admire me so **much**…
TARIEN: And the truth is always less then flattery. (SHE STANDS, AND CROSSES OVER TO ROCA-YOLE) There is no shame in doubt, Roca-Yole. Believe me, we all have such lapses of faith. We probably all will again. But you have so much before you.
ROCA-YOLE: It is so **hard**…
TARIEN: I know. The Order asks everything and gives little. But you cannot condemn yourself for doubt alone. (SHE CLUTCHES AT ROCA-YOLE'S HANDS) You are human, child. It is your fallibility that makes you so. (PAUSE, THEN, INTENSE) Finish your heuristy. Do all you can to remove the Heelstone from the Vortex. If you fail, then you will stay a Spinnerette. But if you succeed… (PAUSE) You are a step away from becoming a Rim Webber, Roca-Yole. Do not turn your back on us now.
ROCA-YOLE WALKS OVER TO THE POOL AND STARES INTO THE WATER. SHE WATCHES THE FISH FOR A FEW MINUTES, THEN TURNS TO TARIEN.
ROCA-YOLE: No. (WITH CONFIDENCE) No. You are right.
TARIEN: (SMILING) How could you think otherwise.
ROCA-YOLE: Thank you, Steersmother.
SHE MAKES A SMALL BOW.
TARIEN: Hshh. You owe me nothing, child. I'm just an old selfish woman. Your ordination as a Rim Webber will mean I will have many less duties to perform.
ROCA-YOLE: (SMILING) Yes, Sister.
TARIEN MOVES AROUND THE POOL TOWARDS THE DOOR.
TARIEN: Come now. We have kept Liegemother Keera-Shilt waiting long enough. You shall say the doxology with her, then we shall go to the Chartulary together.
ROCA-YOLE: And I will pluck the Heelstone from the Vortex like a pebble from a stream.
SHE THROWS THE FLOWER SHE HAS BEEN PLAYING WITH INTO THE POOL.

8. INT. TARDIS: ACE'S ROOM. NIGHT.
A SMALL BOX-ROOM, VERY UNTIDY: FILLED WITH ALL KINDS OF KNICK-KNACKS; CLOTHES SCATTERED AROUND. ACE IS SAT ON THE EDGE OF A LUXURIOUS DOUBLE-BED, THE SHEETS THROWN BACK ON ONE SIDE. SHE HAD JUST WOKEN UP. SHE COMBS HER FINGERS THROUGH HER HAIR.
THE DOCTOR APPEARS WITH A MUG, A TOBY-JUG. IT IS FILLED WITH STEAMING MILKLESS TEA, MELTED BUTTER FLOATING ON TOP. ACE SNIFFS SUSPICIOUSLY. THE DOCTOR HOLDS

THE MUG OUT TO HER.
DOCTOR: Here.
ACE SMILES WEAKLY BUT MAKES NO MOVE TO TAKE THE DRINK.
ACE: Thanks, but I'm all right now. Really.
DOCTOR: You might feel all right, Ace, but your system's had a very nasty shock. (OFFERS THE MUG AGAIN) Now drink it.
ACE GIVES IN. SHE TAKES THE MUG AND LOOKS AT IT WARILY. SHE SIPS THE DRINK BUT IT TASTES DISGUSTING. SHE PULLS A FACE.
ACE: (SPLUTTERING) It's **horrible.**
DOCTOR: Don't be such a baby. It'll do you good.
ACE: It'll do my head in. What is it anyway?
DOCTOR: (SITS ON THE BED BESIDE HER) It's Tibetan tea. The Dalai Lama gave me the recipe. The Tibetans have been drinking it for the last six hundred years.
ACE: This tastes like it's been brewing too long. (PAUSE) You could have put some milk in, at least.
SHE GIVES THE DRINK A FINAL DERISIVE SNIFF THEN ABANDONS THE MUG ON TOP OF THE CABINET.
ACE: I'm sorry, Doctor. Like you said, I've just got over shock. You don't want me to have a relapse, do you?
DOCTOR: (UNCONVINCED) Hmmm…
THERE IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE AS THE DOCTOR LAPSES INTO THOUGHT. ACE TAKES ADVANTAGE OF THE MOMENT.
ACE: Doctor, what happened out there?
DOCTOR: Out there? (CASUALLY) Oh, something and nothing.
ACE STRUGGLES TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED.
ACE: When I fell over the boy - what was **left** of the boy - I felt (PAUSE) I don't know… like I was being drained away. Like I was becoming part of the landscape.
DOCTOR: (SCEPTICAL) You're on ontologically shaky ground there.
ACE: But it **felt** so… real.
DOCTOR: Well it would, wouldn't it?
ACE SEEMS ABOUT TO CONTINUE, BUT DECIDES IT ISN'T WORTH THE EFFORT. SHE SIGHS WEARILY.
THE DOCTOR GLANCES AT HER. HE SUDDENLY REALISES WHAT SHE MUST HAVE BEEN THROUGH AND SOFTENS, ASHAMED AT HIS OBTUSENESS.
DOCTOR: It was probably just a spot of rapid heat conversion in the free lunch field.
ACE LOOKS AT HIM BLANKLY.
DOCTOR: The spontaneous generation of matter from an intrinsic ground-state.
ACE IS STILL LOST. THE DOCTOR TRIES TO PUT IT MORE SIMPLY.
DOCTOR: Quantum mechanics?
ACE IS NONE THE WISER. THE DOCTOR GESTURES DISMISSIVELY.
DOCTOR: It's complicated. (MISSES A BEAT) Anyway, whatever it was, it left a few nasty dents in the TARDIS. It'll probably be a few days before the plasmic shell re-stabilises.
ACE: I though the TARDIS was indestructible?
DOCTOR: She is. Practically. (SUDDENLY DEFENSIVE) Well, she is getting on a bit, you know.
ACE: (HURT) I didn't say a thing.
DOCTOR: I should imagine if you were whacked round the legs with a free lunch field you wouldn't feel so nimble yourself.
THE DOCTOR LEANS OVER SULKILY AND TAKES THE MUG FROM THE CABINET. HE SWALLOWS A MOUTHFUL BUT IS AS DISGUSTED AS ACE WAS. HE TRIES NOT TO SHOW IT.
DOCTOR: (CAUSTICALLY) Anyway, it's over now. So there's nothing to worry about, is there?
THERE IS A SUDDEN JOLT AS IF THE TARDIS HAS HIT SOMETHING. THE DOCTOR SPILLS THE TEA OVER HIMSELF. ACE GIVES HIM A NERVOUS SMILE, TYRING TO MAKE LIGHT OF IT, BUT

THE DOCTOR IS ENRAGED.
DOCTOR: (THREATENING) One word. **Just** one.

9. INT. MERIDIAN:CHARTULARY. NIGHT.
THE ORDINATION IS NEARING ITS CLIMAX. THE ROOM IS FILLED WITH HUNDREDS OF FLICKERING CANDLES.
ROCA-YOLE IS KNEELING IN FRONT OF ONE OF THE RAILS AROUND THE "WEAVEPOOL", AS IF AT PRAYER. SHE IS WEARING A WHITE SASH OVER HER ROBES. SISTERS KAMEKA AND TARIEN ARE STANDING BEHIND HER, ALMOST LIKE GUARDS. THERE IS A GIRL BESIDE EACH OF THEM: BOTH FIFTEEN YEARS OLD, WEARING IDENTICAL BLACK SURPLICES. THEY ARE STUDENT RIM WEBBERS IN THEIR FIRST YEAR AS APPRENTICES.
KAMEKA'S ATTENDANT, STUDENT 1, IS CARRYING A TRAY ON WHICH IS RESTING A BOWL FILLED WITH RED-BLACK INK, A TAPER, A LENGTH OF THREAD AND TWO THIMBLES.
TARIEN'S ATTENDANT, STUDENT 2, IS CARRYING A WHITE COMMUNION CLOTH DRAPED OVER BOTH FOREARMS. LYING ON IT IS A PAIR OF BAROQUE SECATEURS.
ROCA-YOLE: Ameratsu.
SHE MAKES A RITUAL GESTURE: HAND TO FOREHEAD, MOUTH, THROAT, THEN BOWS AGAIN.
ROCA-YOLE: Mhuurashiel.
SHE CLASPS BOTH HANDS OVER HER RIB-CAGE AND MAKES A FINAL BOW.
ROCA-YOLE: Sezyhal.
ROCA-YOLE RISES TO HER FEET. KAMEKA AND STUDENT 1 MOVE ROUND THE RAIL AND STANDS IN FRONT OF ROCA-YOLE. TARIEN STAYS BEHIND THE RAIL, WAITING.
KAMEKA: Estalshea-sehn kareesta. Sirdharata enkataol. (PAUSE) Blessings in your name, Roca-Yole.
KAMEKA MAKES A SMALL RITUAL BOW TO ROCA-YOLE.
KAMEKA: Are you ready to give yourself to the Vortex, and pledge your life to the Order of the Rim Webber?
ROCA-YOLE: I am, Aldermother.
ROCA-YOLE BOWS AGAIN. BEHIND KAMEKA, TARIEN GIVES HER AN ENCOURAGING SMILE. KAMEKA TAKES THE TAPER FROM THE TRAY AND LIGHTS IT ON ONE OF THE CANDLES BESIDE HER. SHE USES IT TO LIGHT THE BOWL OF OIL. IT BURNS WITH A SMOKY FLAME.
KAMEKA: Soul of the Weave.
KAMEKA TAKES ROCA-YOLE'S HAND IN HERS AND DIPS HER FINGERS IN THE BOWL CONTAINING THE INK.
KAMEKA: Blood of the Weave.
SHE LIFTS THE THREAD FROM THE TRAY AND BEGINS WINDING IT ROUND ROCA-YOLE'S HANDS, MAKING IT INTO A CAT'S CRADLE.
KAMEKA: Chains of the Weave.

10. INT. TARDIS: CONTROL ROOM. NIGHT.
THE TARDIS IS IN FLIGHT, THE CENTRAL COLUMN RISING-FALLING.
THE DOCTOR DASHES IN AND OVER TO THE CONSOLE, LOOKING ALARMED. HE IS FOLLOWED BY ACE. THE LIGHTS FLICKER, AND ACE LOOKS ROUND THE ROOM WORRIEDLY.
ACE: How serious is it this time?
THE DOCTOR BARELY NOTICES HER. HE CHECKS THE READINGS. THEY ARE FAR FROM ENCOURAGING.
DOCTOR: That isn't right. (HE RECHECKS THE READINGS AND IS EVEN MORE ALARMED) That **can't** be right. The tachyon displacement vectors are showing a ninety degree deflection.
ACE: Well, how serious is that? (ELABORATING) On a scale of one to ten.
THE DOCTOR NOTICES ACE FOR THE FIRST TIME.
DOCTOR: What are you doing out of bed?
ACE: There's nothing wro -
SHE IS INTERRUPTED BY ANOTHER HUGE JOLT. THE LIGHTS FLICKER AGAIN AND THE ROOM BLURS FOR A FEW SECONDS, SHIMMERING AS IF SEEN THROUGH HEAT-HAZE. THE EFFECT STOPS ABRUPTLY. ACE IS AT THE CONSOLE, HOLDING TIGHTLY ON. SHE SUDDENLY LOOKS ILL. SHE MOANS.
ACE: Oh… I think I'm going to be sick.

DOCTOR: (WITHOUT LOOKING UP) Sit down in the corner and take a few slow deep breaths.
ACE LEANS BACK AGAINST THE CONSOLE TRYING TO GET CONTROL OF HERSELF.
ACE: I think I'd feel a lot safer if I knew what was going on.
DOCTOR: Mass-attraction drift. There's something in the Vortex with us.
THE DOCTOR MOVES IRRITABLY PAST ACE AND OPERATES THE SCANNER CONTROL.
ON THE SCANNER WE SEE A LARGE STONE ROTATING AGAINST THE CORRIDOR OF THE VORTEX. IT IS LIKE ONE OF THE MEGALITHS FROM STONEHENGE. CHISELLED ACROSS ONE SIDE IS THE SAME SPIRAL SYMBOL THAT'S TATTOOED ON THE RIM WEBBER'S CHEEKS.
ACE: How big is it?
DOCTOR: (GLANCING AT THE CONSOLE) Slightly larger than the TARDIS.
ACE: (RELIEVED) Well it's not that big.
THE DOCTOR TURNS ON ACE AND MIMICS HER BITTERLY.
DOCTOR: It might not be **that** big, but it's certainly big enough to do a great deal of damage. (WORRIED) The plasmic shell's already ruptured. If we hit that thing, it'll cause more than a few bruises.

11. INT. MERIDIAN: CHARTULARLY. NIGHT.
ROCA-YOLE IS STANDING IN FRONT OF THE "WEAVEPOOL" AS WE FIRST SAW HER: EYES CLOSED; CONNECTED TO TWO PARALLEL WEAVESPOKES BY THE CAT'S CRADLE AROUND HER HANDS. HER FINGERTIPS ARE STAINED RED AND SHE IS WEARING A THIMBLE ON EACH THUMB, WHICH SHE IS STROKING LIGHTLY AGAINST THE WEAVESPOKES, AS IF PLAYING SOME KIND OF BIZARRE HARP.
THE WATER IN THE "WEAVEPOOL" RIPPLES SLIGHTLY AND WE SEE AN IMAGE START TO FORM. THERE IS A SUDDEN TINY VIBRATION IN THE THREAD, AND ROCA-YOLE'S FACE CREASES WITH PAIN. SHE MUTTERS A PRAYER UNDER HER BREATH.
ROCA-YOLE: (SOFTLY) Sirdharata… Sirdharata enkatol…
WE CLOSE IN ON THE "WEAVEPOOL". REFLECTED IN THE WATER IS AN IMAGE OF THE VORTEX. AT THE CENTRE OF IT IS THE SLOWLY SPINNING HEELSTONE. AND NEAR THAT, THE TARDIS ITSELF.

TELECINE 5:
EXT. THE VORTEX. NIGHT.
THE TARDIS IS DRIFTING SLOWLY TOWARDS THE STONE, AS IF TRYING TO MANOEUVRE ROUND IT. INSTEAD IT MOVES TOO NEAR. AS THE STONE COMPLETES ITS SPIN IT HITS THE CORNER OF THE TARDIS STRAIGHT ON.
END TELECINE 5.

12. INT. TARDIS: CONTROL ROOM. NIGHT.
WE CUT TO THE ROOM JUST AS ANOTHER JOLT SHUDDERS THROUGH IT. THERE IS THE SAME SHIMMERING BLUR, EVEN MORE EXTREME THAN BEFORE, AND THE LIGHTS DIM LOW.
THE JOLT ALMOST LOOSENS ACE'S GRIP ON THE CONSOLE. SHE TALKS THROUGH THE BLURRING EFFECT AND HER VOICE IS DISTORTED, SLURRED AND DRAGGED OUT.
ACE: Doctor!
THE BLURRING FADES GRADUALLY BUT THE LIGHTS STAY LOW, LEAVING THE ROOM IN SEMI-DARKNESS. ON THE SCANNER, THE STONE, NOW STATIONARY, BLOCKS OUT OVER HALF THE SCREEN.
THE DOCTOR CONTINUES WORKING DESPERATELY, USELESSLY AT THE CONTROLS.
DOCTOR: (DEFEATED) That's it. The outer shell's ruptured.
ACE: What does that mean?
DOCTOR: It means someone's thrown a very large stone in the middle of our very small pond. (MOVES AROUND THE CONSOLE) I'll try and reduce the displacement wave, but you'd better prepare yourself for a -
THERE IS ANOTHER HUGE JOLT, FOLLOWED BY A VIOLENT SHUDDERING. AN ALARM SOUNDS.
THE DOCTOR STRUGGLES WITH THE CONTROLS.

ACE: (YELL) Doctor! The **door!**
DOCTOR: (ABSENTLY) What?
HE LOOKS UP CALMLY. WHEN HE SEES WHAT ACE IS INDICATING HIS FACE TIGHTENS WITH ALARM.
IMPOSSIBLY, THE TARDIS DOORS HAVE STARTED TO OPEN. WHITE PIERCING LIGHT, BLINDING IN THE SEMI-DARKNESS, FLOODS IN BETWEEN THEM LIKE A TIDE OF LIQUID FIRE.
THE DOCTOR DASHES ROUND THE CONSOLE AND OPERATES THE DOOR CONTROLS.
DOCTOR: Get out!
THE DOORS CONTINUE TO INCH OPEN.
THE DOCTOR SEES THAT ACE IS STILL IN THE ROOM AND TURNS TO HER.
DOCTOR: (SHOUTING) Ace, **get out!**
ACE: (LOST) What's happening?
THE DOCTOR MAKES A LAST ATTEMPT TO RESTORE CONTROL.
DOCTOR: It's no use.
HE SEES THAT ACE IS STILL IN THE ROOM, AND ABANDONS THE CONSOLE. HE RUSHES OVER TO ACE AND HURRIES HER TO THE INSIDE DOOR, TALKING AS HE GOES -
DOCTOR: (SHOUTING) Come on… Ace, **come on!** The only thing between us and the Vortex are those doors.
THE DOOR LEADING TO SAFETY IS UNSTABLE, BEGINNING THE SHIMMER WITH STATIC. IT DOE NOT OPEN.
ACE CLUTCHES HER CHEST IN PAIN AND DRAWS IN A DEEP BREATH. SHE IS VERY FRIGHTENED.
ACE: Oh God. It's just like before.
AS THE DOCTOR STRUGGLES WITH THE DOOR, THE WHITE LIGHT INCREASES IN INTENSITY. EVERYTHING IS GLARING, OVER-EXPOSED. THE LIGHT BEGINS TO FLOOD OUT ACE'S TERRIFIED FEATURES.
ACE: Oh God. Oh, God, **please…** Doctor, **please…** It's inside me. I can feel it inside me.
THE LIGHT INTENSIFIES AND BLOTS EVERYTHING OUT. THERE IS A ROARING RUSHING SOUND, ALMOST LIKE A HURRICANE. FOR A SECOND WE CAN HEAR ACE SCREAMING ABOVE IT -
ACE: (OFF) **It's taking me to pieces!**
THEN IT DROWNS HER OUT.
FADE TO WHITE

END OF EPISODE 1.

The Wee Man

by Iain Hepburn

The tape machine bleeped loudly, a faint grinding sound emanating from its front as the seemingly ancient recording mechanism kicked itself unhappily into life, chugging away at the oxide on the tape. McGregor sat himself down in the chair, sipping gently from the clear plastic cup of water in front of him.

'Interview commenced oh eight twenty hours, Partick CID. Present are myself, Detective Inspector Graham McGregor, Detective Constable Charles Fordyce and Mr Andrew Hunter Boyne Smith. Mr Smith has waved his right to legal representation at this time.' McGregor took another sip from the cool water, aware that the suspect looked parched. His voice changed, no longer the clear, professional tones he used on the phone. His tough Greenock vowels were back with a vengeance.

'Right,' he barked. 'Mon then, Andy. Gonnae tell us exactly what happened?'

Smith slumped back in his chair. 'Nut,' he announced, chin dropping beneath the neckline of his replica Rangers top. 'Wilnae.'

'Fair enough,' responded Fordyce. He was English, a Yorkshireman, his gruff tones contrasting with the glottal stops of the other two. 'You can remain silent if you want. But you were found near the badly sliced and stabbed body of Mr David Ferguson, holding a knife in your hand and, just to be on the safe side, were covered in the blood of the aforementioned Mr Ferguson. If ever the phrase 'being caught red handed' was more apt, I'd like to know about it.'

Smith sighed. 'Ah cannae tell yeys. Ye'd no believe me, no matter whit ah telt yeys. So's it's no gonnae make a blind bit o' difference tae me either way. Is it?'

McGregor appraised the small, ginger, wiry figure in front of him, clad in the classic ned uniform of Kappa shellsuit, Rangers top and white trainers. The blood had been washed off of him, while his missus had come up with a change of clothing for him while the stuff he'd been wearing – which was, to all intents and purposes, identical to his current garb – was sent for forensic examination.

'Believe me, Andy. Efter the night we've had, we'll listen tae ye.'

Smith smiled, just a little, breaking his wearied expression. 'Aye, yous hauv alwise been fair tae me. I'll gie yeys tha'.' He thought for a moment. 'Aw right. I'll tell ye whit happened. But yeys cannae butt in, yeys cannae say onythin'. Yous two just stay there an' let me say whit ah've got tae. Or nae deal. Awright?'

Fordyce opened his mouth to speak, but McGregor raised a hand, cutting him off. 'Fine. Take it away, we're all ears.'

Which is how Smith began his tale.

'So's, we wur at Ibrox undergroon, right? Davie and me, we were just comin' back frae the game an we thought we'd hae a wee bit ae fun wi' these wee tims that wur comin' doon ahent us. Couldnae hauv been mair than nineteen, the pair ae them. It wis comin' up oan the last train, aye? About hauf ten, elevenish. So's we're waiting at the bottom ae the steps as they're comin' doon. The pair were micks, too, must hauv come over for tae see the game.

So's anyways. They get past us, walking up tae the platform like, when we steps out frae ahent them and starts geein it yahoo wi the party songs. Follow Follow, aw that shite, aye? These wee guys, they look like their near shiteing themsels there and then, and that's makin' me and Davie worse. Cus we wurnae gonnae dae onythin nasty tae them, aye? Just gie them a wee scare, make sure they remember wha's in charge roon here.

So's the last's comin by this point. We can hear it rattling up the tube, the wee light oan the front shining in, and these guys, they're seriously fuckin panicin' by this point because they've twigged we're getting oan the train wi' them, an' they've goat tae get oan as well if they're wantin' their beds that

night. Anyways, there we wur, gieing it laldy like, when there's this fuckin' great scream from ahent us. Aw fower ae us were turnin' at the same time tae tak a swatch, but we couldnae see nut'in.

By this point, byraway, the train's pulled up n the doors hauv opened fur us, the wee Irish boys dive in and peg it up the carriage, tryin tae keep oot wur way. Me and Davie went in, we wurnae interested in scarin' them by that point, we wur wantin' tae see whit wis makin' aw the rackit. But the doors started to close by then, so we wur up at the windae, peerin' oot. An we couldnae see nut'in, until just as the train wis pullin away, there was this big thumpin oan the back ae the train. We're lookin aboot, an we couldnae see whit it wis, so Davie says we should look out the back o' the driver's wee cubbyhole. So he's shooglin' the door open, and eventually it breaks an' he's pushin' intae the thing.

And he just looks oot ae the windae and mutters tae himself, 'Holy Fuck.'

Noo, Davie's no wan tae tak the Lord's name in vain, 'specially if he's been noisin' up the tims aforehaund. So we wur lookin oot ae this windae, nane o' us sure whit exactly we wur meant tae be sayin' by this point. Cos runnin efter this train...runnin efter this train wis this big guy.
An ah hauv tae admit it – ah thought this wis just some jaiky wha'd been gettin' steamed intae the buckie or somehin. So ah start flickin him the vickies through the windae, shoutin at him. But Davie, he's gone dead quiet, like, an it's gettin' me worried so's ah'm asking him whit's the matter.

'It's that wee gadge chasin' us, Davie,' he says. 'There's somethin no right aboot him.'

'Aye,' ah says, 'he's chasin efter wan ae the undergroon trains. Mon, ye walloper.'

'Naw, Davie, ye'r no getting' whit ah mean. The tracks here are electrified. That punter should hae been pakora as soon as he jumped on the rails.'

Ah looked oot at the boy chasin efter us, and here, wis there no blue sparks just flashin up every time he put his foot doon oan the rails. It wis like thae wee indoor firework displays ye get when its near bonfire night. And then the boy throws himsel' at the train, like and he's haudin' oan tae the wee bumper thingies at the front, getting dragged along ahent us, aw these sparks flashin' up aboot him. And because there's aw this light aboot him this time, we can see whit he's like.

And here, was the gadge no fuckin' metal? Seriously. Before ye's say any'hin, this boy was made ae metal. Metal skin, metal claithes. He looked like he was wan ae thae robot things they had up the Gerden festival a few year ago, like. And he wis haudin oan tae the back ae the train, getting' pulled along as it went up the line.

'Fuck's sake, man!' says Davie, startin' tae panic a wee bit by this time. 'Whit are we gonnae dae?'

Ah didnae ken whit ah wis gonnae say. Ah mean, this thing ahent us was seriously fucked-up, byraway. Part o me just wantit tae get aff the train at the next stop, nae matter where the fuck we wur, and get tae the nearest pub, get bevvied up and pretend this never happened. But ah couldnae get ower the fact there was this stupit wee choob ahent us, gettin dragged along and getting sent up in a blue light aw the way along. Ah wis getting ready for tae use ma moby, gie you guys a bell an see if yous could dae onyhin wi' him, when this voice wis speakin tae me.

'I wouldn't do that, if ah wis you,' he's sayin. It wis this wee guy, dressed aw funny, like. He wis Scottish, but a posh Scottish, if ye ken whit ah'm meanin. He just looked at us, then oot the windae. 'That creature's no human. It's dangerous, it's been wandierin aboot the tunnels fur years an' it will kill you, so git away frae there noo.'

Davie's never been wan tae take tae orders like that so good, so's he turns roond and get's ready tae lay aboot this wee punter. Afore he can dae onyhin, though, the fuckin windae explodes ahent us and this wee guy's draggin' us oot the wee lobby bit intae the carriage.

And here, wis this big fucker no trying tae come in through the back windae o' the train? Now, ah ken exactly whit yous pair are thinkin, but ah'm no making this up. Honest, nae guisin' this is wan hunner per cent doon the line. So's we're staunin' there, watching this big metal pnter hauin himsel' in, when the wee guy pushes wurselves oot the way and heads intae the driver's cabin.

'Here, go faster!' ah shouted. 'Gonnae try an' shake him aff!'

'Naw,' shouts the wee guy. 'Haud ontae somehin.'

And he reaches out wi his brolly, and flicks wan ae the switches oan the panel. Well, see the train? The train lurches like it wis pished or somehin, and we're aye skitin' about on the flair, when this fuckin' great thing goes fleein through the air, batterin aff aw the poles along the carriage. So's wur getting to wur feet, an Davie starts on the wee guy, ready tae boot his baws. Pure beelin, so he wis, when there's

this scuffling sound frae the back ae the carriage. This guy that wis chasin us? He starts staunin up, an he's usin the poles an the haunrails to pull himsel upwards. And that wis the first look at him ah got.

Here, ah'm nae guisin about this, byraway. But this punter wis about seven an a hauf foot tall, big lad. Hard as fuck lookin, an aw. But he wis made ae metal an aw, but it wis like his skin, like. He haud this weird lookin coupin oan him an aw, like a motorbike helmet or somehin, but wi eyeholes and a slit. Big metal balaclava, wi haundles oot the side.

The wee guy starts pushing us ahent him, telling us to keep oot the way. But Davie shoved him intae the seat and he goes doon the passageway, offerin' this thing a square go. 'Mon then,' he's sayin. 'Wantin' some, ur ye? Well, 'mon, ye dobber. Fuckin hoo about it?'

And big Davie, does he no pull his chib frae his back pocket and start mincin aboot the front ae this thing, shoutin' in its face and gein' it laldy wi aw the verbals. So's he must hauv riled this thing, since he grabs Davie and haus him up, hurlin' him intae the wee bit whur the doors are, and batters fuck oot ae him. Davie's lyin' there, twitchin away like he's got tourette's or somehin, an ah have tae admit, lads, ah wis shitein masel then..

The wee guy wis lookin back at me then, and wis whisperin, like he didnae want that big basturd tae hear him. 'Get back intae the cabin,' he said. 'When ah gie the word, press that red button and star the train up. Ah'll take care ae this hing, and then yous'll nae hauv tae worry about it any mair.'

Ah wisnae in the mood fur argyin wi the boy, so's ah did as ah wis telt and ducked in oot the wai. Ah wis watchin, though, and ah saw the wee guy rootin aboot in his pooches fur somehin, ah couldnae tell yous whit it wis. So's onyways, he's wanderin' up the carriage, keepin' his voice dead low, like he was talkin' tae some wounded animal, byrraway. But he wisnae bein' nice or pally tae it or onyhin. He wis cursin' this hing, cawin it aye the names unner the sun, like it hud killt aw his family or somehin. So's he's' movin taewards it, like, an then just whin he's aboot an erm's length away, he shouts at me. So's ah hits the button, like the wee guy telt me to, an' the carriage lurches again. Ah wis sent skitin' oot the cabin, while the big metal guy went fleein as well. Ah could see unner his feet, this time, and here, wis the souls o' his shoes no meltit, an aw these black merks up the run o' his legs. But the wee guy wis just staunin there, watchin' this thing while it fell, and then he wis flingin' his hauns forwards and coverin' this thing in whit looked like glitter, aye an he wis sprayin this stuff aye ower the big lad. And the big lad sounded like he wis chokin oan it, lyin' there, shakin and hackin' its lungs oot. An aw this green stuff wis comin up oot it's mouth, like, an ah hauvtae admit, ah wis wantin tae go an' help this thing, but then ah saw Davie, an he wis in a right mess, byrraway. Ah went ower tae him instead, an where this thing had had haud ae him, there wis scratches an cuts, an it looked like the thing had been stabbin' him aw the time, an there wis aw this blood aw ower the place. An ah picked up the knife, cuz it wis just layin there, an it looked kinda wrang, wi aw that blood an everyhin aboot him. So's the train's comin' intae the station by that point, an when ah looks round the wee guy's gone, ah cannae see him onywhere, and the big metal 'hing's vanished an aw, so's it's just me an Davie, an yous boys wir waitin' outside oan the platform fur us.'

Smith sighed and leaned back in his chair. With a loud bleep, the recorder started its signal warning the officers the tape was coming to an end. McGregor leaned across, and spoke into the microphone. 'Interview with suspect terminated oh eight forty hours, to allow officers a fly cuppie.'. They got to their feet and walked out of the room.

Outside, propped up against the wall, was a short, tweed clad man nervously clutching a battered straw hat. 'Gentlemen,' he spoke in soft Scots tones. 'How is he?'

'Talkin' gibberish,' muttered McGregor frustratedly. 'Metal men in the undergroond. Whit next?'

The little man shook his head. 'He's not talking gibberish, I'm afraid. He's very much correct. But you know what you have to do?'

They looked at him. 'What?' asked Fordyce.

The little man leaned in closed. 'I said, you know what you have to do?'

There was a pause while their eyes refocused, then they turned and went back into the interview room. McGregor's voice echoed out into the corridor as the door swung slowly behind him. 'Awright, then, Andy. We'll let you away wi a caution this time…'

The little man replaced his hat on his head with a jaunty flip, then wandered off into the night.

CRACKS IN THE PAVEMENT (AKA SUBTERRANEAN HOMESICK ALIEN)

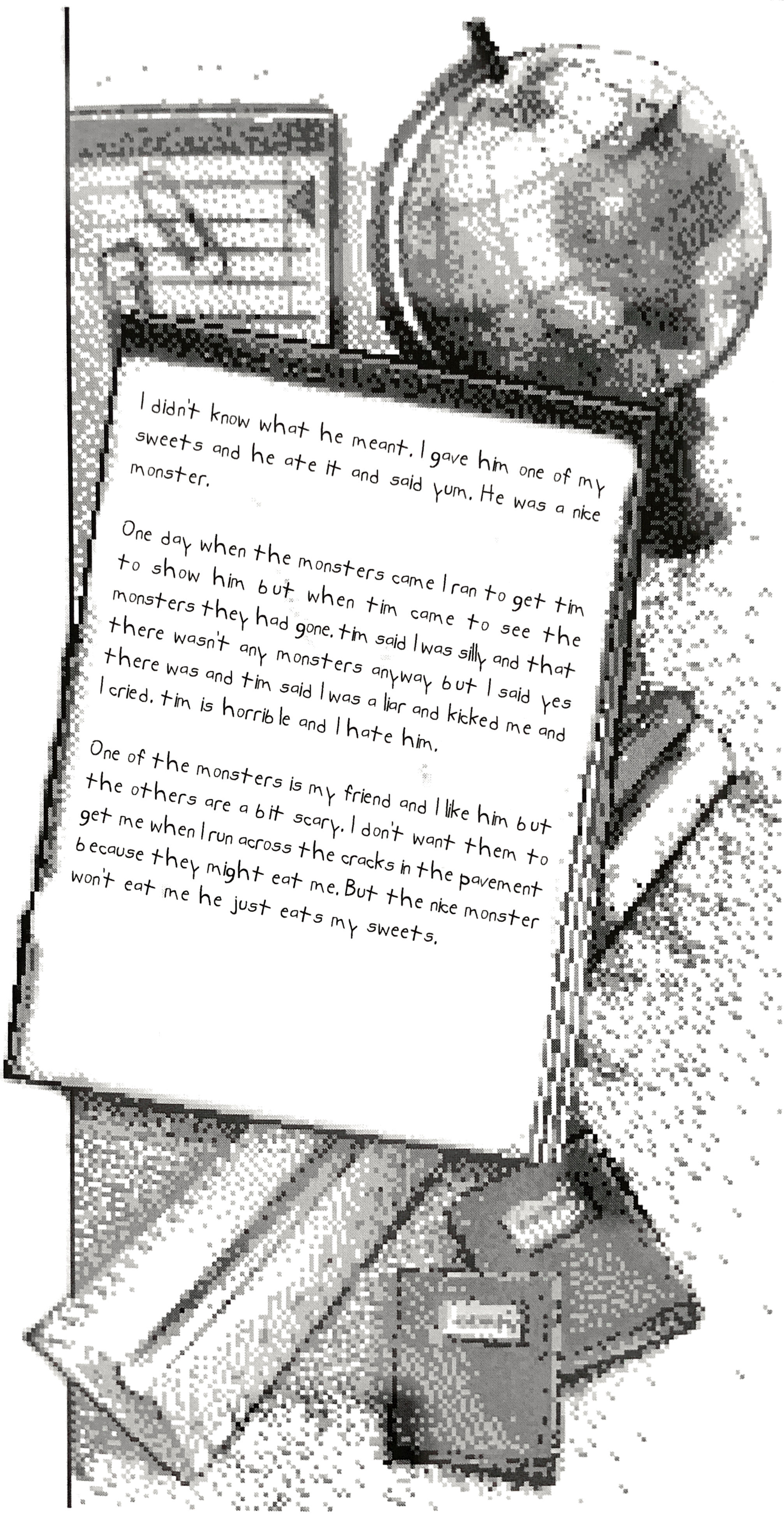
THE COLLECTED WRITINGS OF ROBERT PARKER

My favourite game
by Robert Parker Age 6 Class 2B
(Mrs Rogers)
6th July

My favourite game I like to play is a game called don't step on the cracks in the pavement. You have to run across the pavement and try not to step on the cracks and if you do you are the loser.

My mummy thinks its a silly game, but I told her there are monsters under the ground and they can come up through the cracks and get me. My mummy tells me that I am silly and that there are no monsters but I know she is not right because I have seen them.

The monsters are big and green like the ones from the telly but you can see through them because they look like smoke. One day one of the monsters spoke to me but he spoke foreign and


I didn't know what he meant. I gave him one of my sweets and he ate it and said yum. He was a nice monster.

One day when the monsters came I ran to get tim to show him but when tim came to see the monsters they had gone. tim said I was silly and that there wasn't any monsters anyway but I said yes there was and tim said I was a liar and kicked me and I cried. tim is horrible and I hate him.

One of the monsters is my friend and I like him but the others are a bit scary. I don't want them to get me when I run across the cracks in the pavement because they might eat me. But the nice monster won't eat me he just eats my sweets.

What we did in the holidays
by Robert Parker Age 6 Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
5th September

In the holidays my mummy and daddy took me on holiday to a place called devon and it was nice. We went to a farm and saw lots of sheep and cows who went moo at me and I thought they were funny. The sheep didn't like me and kept running away from me when I went to see them and the farmer thought it was funny.

When we got back from devon mummy said that I had lots of weeks to play before I came back to school so I played my favourite game lots of times. My friend the monster was pleased to see me I think he wanted some sweets when I wasn't there but I didn't leave him any. My friend can say some words now he can say robert which is my name and hello and sweets because he likes them. I will try to learn him some more words so we can play together.

My mummy said she didn't want me to play with the monster she said I should play with tim but tim is horrible and he smells and he kicks me so I said no.

My best day
by Robert Parker
(Mrs Harding)
20th September

Age 7 Class 3B

My best day was my birthday when I was seven. My mummy and daddy bought me a bike which was really nice. A blue one like I wanted.

I had a party which was fun but tim was there and he told my mummy that I talked to monsters that weren't there and my mummy told me I shouldn't but I said that the monster was my friend that he didn't kick me.

After the party I rode my bike to where the monster lives and he came out to see me. I told him about the games I had played at my party and he told me about a new game called pretending. The monster said that it would be fun and that he could pretend to be me and I could be like a monster if I wanted. I said ok but when the monster tried to be me it hurt my head so he stopped. He said he would try to think of another game but I had to go home before my mummy got worried.

My mummy let me finish the birthday cake and that was my best day.

What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
25th September

At the weekend I played on my bike that I got for my birthday. It is blue.

I went to see my friend the monster but he wasn't there but there was a man there with a hat and a funny umbrella. I said to the man what are you doing and he said he was looking for monsters and I told him I had seen them. The man asked me what they looked like and I told him and he looked very sad so I told him one of them was a nice monster who played games with me which made the man look funny at me. Then he did some juggling which made me laugh and then I said goodbye and went home.

I told my mummy about the man and she was very cross that I had talked to him because I didn't know who he was.

My best friend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
27th September

My best friend is my monster who lives under the pavement because he thinks up lots of games for us to play. Tim used to be my best friend but I don't like him any more because he's not as good as my monster and doesn't play any good games like he does.

What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
2nd October

On the weekend I went to see my friend the monster and he told me he had a new game for us to play. He said that he could go in my head and it wouldn't hurt this time and he could come to school with me and talk to me all the time. I said ok so he did and it didn't hurt at all.

After that I couldn't see him but I could hear him in my head and it was funny. The monster told me some new games to play and we had lots of fun.

What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
9th October

This weekend my mummy and daddy took me to granddad's house. Granddad gave me some sweets and I played with his dog Rufus in the garden. Rufus is a nice dog but he jumps up at me and I don't like that much. Granddad says it is just because he likes me but he had to tell him to stop after a while because I got upset. The monster in my head told me that Rufus was a bad dog and that he would stop him from jumping up at me.

When we got home granddad rung mummy to tell her that Rufus wasn't feeling very well and asked if I had given him anything bad to eat. I said that I hadn't. In the morning granddad rung again to say that Rufus had died in the night and I was sad. The monster told me that I shouldn't be sad because Rufus was a bad dog who scared me.

What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
16th October

This weekend a man came round our house. He said he was a doctor but my mummy said that he didn't look like one. I told mummy that I had seen the man before and that he had talked to me in the street. Mummy got very angry with the man and told him to leave me alone. The man said that I was in danger and tried to tell mummy about the monsters but she told him he was talking nonsense at that the monsters only existed in my head. The man said that was what he was afraid of.

When he had gone mummy asked me about the monsters and I told her that I hadn't seen them for a long time. Mummy seemed really pleased and gave me some sweets. The monster in my head was pleased too because he was scared of the man and didn't want him to talk to me.

What we did at half-term
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
30th October

We had a really good time at half-term. The monster in my head is talking a lot more now and he told me all about the other monsters who live under the pavement. He said they came from another planet and that they had crashed on this one a long time ago. Their space ship was underground and people had built the pavement over the top of it when they were asleep but they had managed to get out because they were able to alter their mole letrolar struckchor and come up through the cracks in the pavement.

We went to see the other monsters and this time they didn't try to eat me. The monster in my head said that they would now trust me because I was in sim by osis with him and that he was their leader. My monster told me that we had to find friends for them too because they were sad having to hide under the pavement.

The monster in my head told me that I should tell Tim about the monsters but he still didn't believe me. I promised to give him some sweets if he came to see them so he agreed. When we got there there were no monsters and I thought that he would kick me again. If he did, my monster told me that we would kick him back much harder. Tim was going to go, but then the monsters came out of cracks in the pavement and Tim could see them. Tim started to cry and he wet himself all down his leg. When the monster who wanted Tim to be his friend tried to talk to him, Tim ran away. The monster tried to stop him but Tim screamed and kicked so the monster let him go before anyone came.

The monster in my head told me that for the sym by osis to work the host mind must have to be willing or unconshus.

Tim's mummy came round to see my mummy in the evening and told her that Tim was very ill because he was so scared of the monsters that I had told him about. I told them that Tim had seen them for himself and that one day I would show them the monsters. Mum looked very worried and sent me to bed early. I could hear Tim's mummy and my mummy shouting downstairs.

In the morning I went back to the monster's place and the little man was there again. I think he was waiting for me. He asked me if the monster was inside my head and I said yes it was. He told me it had to leave my head, leave this world but I told him no it was my friend. The man came closer to me and I pushed him back really hard. The man went flying backward through the air and landed a long way away in a messy heap which made me laugh.

The man got up after a while and looked really worried. I told him to stay away from me or I would hurt him more next time. So he went away.

When I got home my mother told me to tidy my room before lunch but I said no so mother got cross and told me I wouldn't get any lunch. I told her she would make me lunch or she would be sorry. Mother was going to argue, but she looked at my face and she could see I meant it. So she made me my favourite which is boiled eggs with soldiers and gave me some sweets afterwards.

My mother never told me off all week even though I was quite naughty, so I had the best week ever.

What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Class 3B (Mrs Harding)
Age 7
6th November

The little man was waiting for me outside the gates on Friday after school. He was standing with my Mother, clutching his stupid umbrella in an anxious manner, trying to spot me in the crowd of children teeming out of the school. When he saw me his face was a picture of concern, but I could tell what he was really thinking. That I'm evil.

My mother said that he had convinced her that he was trying to help, that he was from some government department but I interrupted her, telling her to shut up. She did as she was told. Good girl. I turned to the umbrella carrying idiot and said I know what you want little man. I know what you came here to do. But I won't let you take my friend away. He's staying with me forever.

The man asked me if I still hear the monster in my head and I told him that I didn't need to. We thought the same thoughts now. Had the same ideas.

The man moved forward and I tried to push him away with my mind but it was harder this time. He had learned how to resist me. But he was not strong enough and eventually he collapsed to the floor clutching his head. Lots of people gathered round him and someone called an ambulance. I told mother to take me home.

On Saturday I began devising plans to free my brethren still trapped under the pavement. The gaseous forms we are able to take can only be a temporary solution, and in any case, we need to return to the ship after only a few minutes in this form before our molecular structure starts to break down permanently.

In the absence of suitable, willing, host bodies, the only option may be to dig out the ship itself, so that my brothers can be free to emerge in their original, solid forms. Revenge on these humans who buried us underground for centuries will be sweet.

Note sent to Mrs Harding, 3B
Writer unknown, but does not match the handwriting of Robert Parker.

We were visited last night by a man who called himself a social worker. He told us that you had contacted social services after becoming worried about the content of some of my schoolwork.

My mother tried to stop him coming in, but he insisted and pushed past her. When he saw me he offered me some sweets, the condescending bastard. He asked me about the monsters in my head, and asked me what it felt like.

I told him he didn't want to know.

He told me that he really did. That was what he was here for.

So I took the man's head in my hands and I pressed, hard. That's what it feels like, I said. That's what it feels like.

The man's face was going red. I pressed some more and he started to scream. You wanted to know, I said, you insisted. Blood started pouring from his ears, and he was screaming even louder. I pressed harder, felt his skull begin to crack. I twisted my hands and heard his neck break with a loud snap. I threw his body to the floor and told my mother to clean up the mess.

Are you worried now, Mrs Harding? You should be, because you will be next.

Statement given to the police by Robert Parker, aged 7, following the discovery of the body of Steven Crane, social worker, at the home of his parents.

I tried to stop Daddy but he wouldn't. He twisted the man's head and I heard a snap and the man went all floppy and Daddy told Mummy to bury him in the garden. Daddy told me that I was not to tell anyone or I would be buried in the garden too.

Will Daddy kill me now?

What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Stonaway)
13th November

I am staying with my Grandfather at the moment while the police question my Mother and Father. I think he is grateful for the company following the oh so sad death of that little mutt Rufus.

I note that Mrs Harding has not turned in today. Nothing serious I hope.

The little man is back. Does he never give up? He is strong, but he cannot hope to defeat me.

While my Granddad looks after me in ignorant bliss, I am arranging for the ship to be dug out of the ground. My brethren shall be free, and this world will feel the full force of our power. The power of our wrath.

What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Stonaway)
20th November

Preparations continue most satisfactorily on the excavation of the ship. The hull is visible now; a little battle scarred but otherwise intact. My mood lifts higher with each piece of human detritus that is removed, like the weight is being lifted from my own body.

At this rate, the ship will be free tonight, and we can take our leave of this pitiful planet. The only fly in the ointment is the little man. But he is scared of me and he is right to be. He is weak, and I am stronger than he could possibly imagine. He need be scared no longer, for after tonight his worries will be over. Forever.

It ends tonight, little man. I have a special parting gift in store for you.

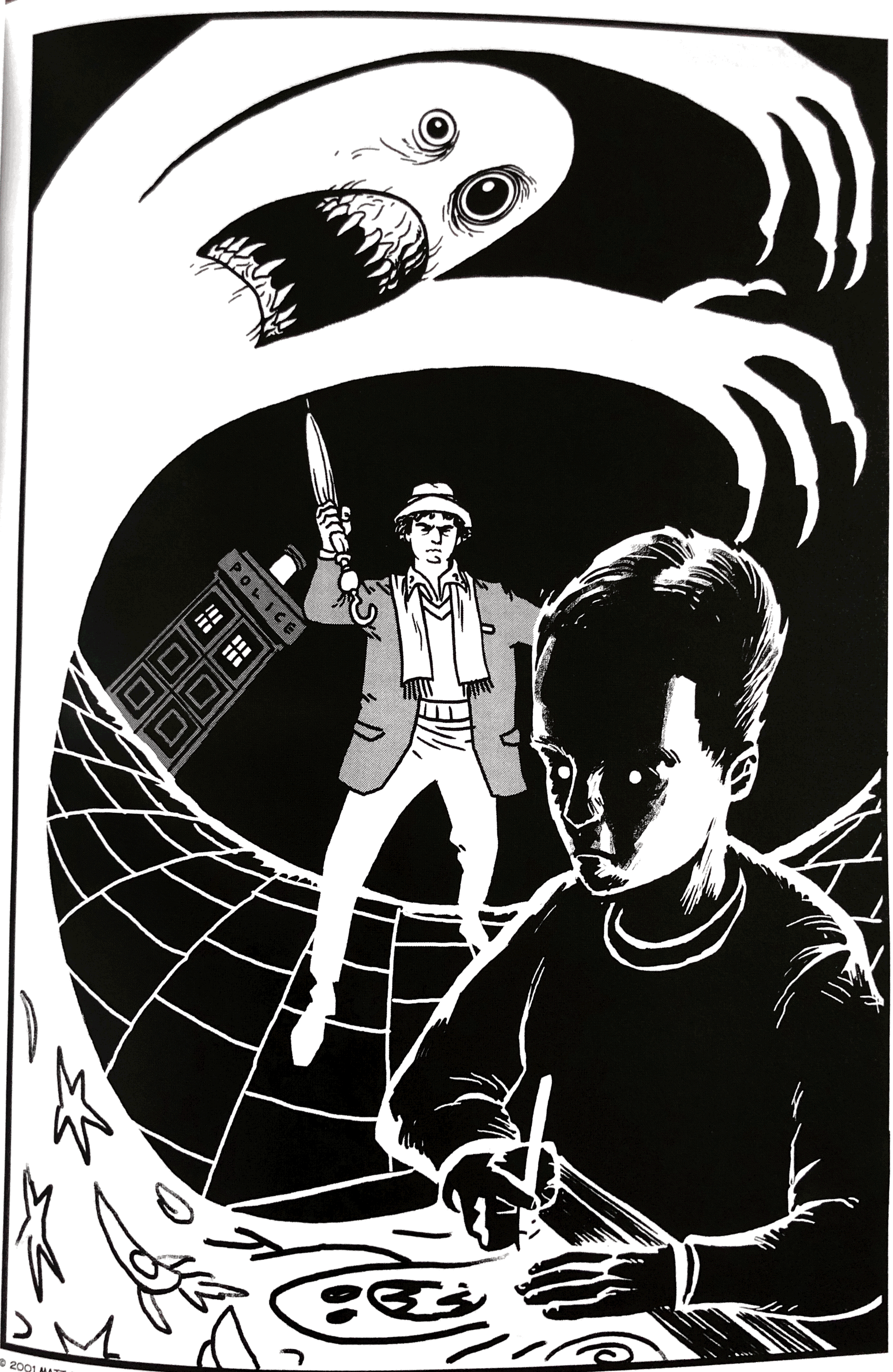
What we did at the weekend
by Robert Parker Age 7 Class 3B (Mrs Stonaway)
27th November

At the weekend I met a little man with an umbrella who did some juggling and made me laugh. He was funny. He asked me if I ever played a game where I tried not to step on the cracks in the pavement and I told him that it was a silly game and he smiled and said that yes it was silly.

Granddad said he was a good man who had helped me but I didn't know who he was. He said he had to go away and I said where are you going and he said a long way away to a place where people needed him. I gave him one of my sweets and he seemed really pleased. He told me that I would see my mummy and daddy again soon because the gove ment men had told the police they weren't really naughty and they could come home.

The man gave me his balls that he juggles with and told me to keep them. Then he went away and I never saw him again which made me a bit sad.

It is very hard to juggle but I am getting better at it and Tim thinks I will be the best juggler ever if I carry on. Tim is my best friend.



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What Guns Do

by Dale Smith

Okay, so the world's about to end. The Doctor's sat in the middle of the floor, one wire in one hand, one wire in the other. You can practically feel the electricity begging him to touch them, to let it flow, to unleash the chaos. The air crackles with it, so much so that you'd think that's were the charge was, not in one red wire, and one blue.

One second. Is he sweating? I am.

'Do you want to talk about it?' he asks me.

I consider. I don't even want to think about it.

Let's go back.

I'm standing over him - over it. What is it? It doesn't matter. It's big and green and scaly and thirty seconds ago it had a gun in its hand. Thirty seconds ago it was pointing that gun at the Doctor and telling him to make his peace with whatever God he worshipped. Thirty seconds ago, it was towering over the Doctor, watching as thick blood trickled down his forehead: blood that smeared the butt of the dark gunmetal. Thirty seconds ago, it didn't even seem to notice me - well, isn't that the companion's lot, to play second fiddle to short, dark and broody in the paisley scarf? - but then somehow thirty seconds passed and the gun's in my hand, pointing at a green and scaly forehead.

It looks up at me with crystal blue eyes - human eyes - and says nothing, out loud.

'Well?' asks the Doctor in my ear. 'What are you waiting for? You've got the gun. You're in control. Take control. Show him what guns are for. Show him what guns do.'

It screams at me, in silence, with bright blue eyes.

Let's go back.

'I met you at a pretty weird time in my life,' I said.

Let's go back.

So you've heard of the Doctor. Short dude, eyes like and arc-welder's flame, dress-sense like a five-year old set loose in the dressing-up cupboard.

You've heard stories: how he turns up just before all hell breaks loose - usually gets the blame too, when the giants start knocking through matchstick defences - how he turns up and somehow, somehow just makes everything right again. Not like it was, maybe, not even good sometimes, but just right.

But you've never heard of me, have you. Den Tyler. Companion number who-cares in a series of God-knows-how-many.

There we were, walking down the street - little and large - two of us twice as real as death or taxes, but I bet you didn't even notice me, did you? I bet you couldn't take your eyes off the odd looking bloke swinging his umbrella and sniffing the air for evil.

'Earth,' I said, two steps behind as always. 'Again. Twentieth century. Again. Are you sure that thing's a time machine?'

He just put a finger to his lips, his eyes flicking this way and that, seeing things I'll never even know.

'I know, I know,' I muttered. 'Rule number one: don't mention the TARDIS.'

'Or me,' the Doctor intoned, barely glancing at me. 'There are people here I'd rather didn't know about me.'

'Look, Doctor,' a pause - cue stock companion phrase number six hundred and three: 'What's going on?'

He looked at me then: grey eyes that cut through so far I know – just know - that he can see every thought I've ever had, before I've ever had it.

'Evil,' he said. The umbrella twitched and pointed. 'This way.'

And so there I go again, playing catch up.

It's looking up at me with bright blue eyes - at me, not at the gun staring back at it - and it's not saying a word. It can't get a word in edgeways.

'Guns kill. Guns end lives,' the Doctor's saying, but still it's looking straight at me, barely hearing him. 'They end the lives at both ends of the muzzle.'

But it's not listening to him, it's looking at me. Because I'm the one holding the gun now.

'That's right,' the Doctor whispered, right inside my head. 'You've got the gun. You've got the power. Because you've got the gun. That makes you powerful, doesn't it.'

But still I'm not pulling the trigger.

I met him at a pretty weird time in my life. Let's go back.

Den Tyler, fifth cog in the machine that fits with the fifth cog of the machine that turns with the fifth cog of the machine that makes sure all the letters that get sent to the second cog get neatly filed away in the right place with the right date written in blue biro in the right hand corner, just in case the first cog wants to read them. The first cog never does, of course, but that's all right: there's a whole other machine that takes all of the letters out of their neat files on the appropriate date and makes sure that they're carefully shredded before heading home to make bedding for the kid's hamster.

For this, they give me twenty thousand a year. Twenty thousand what I'm not even sure, because I never get to see it with my own eyes: it's all just numbers on a screen that gradually count down to the end of the month.

For this I give them eight hours of my life, five days a week plus overtime, with fourteen days off a year for good behaviour. Not including bank holidays and sick days and Sundays.

But that's all right, because as the little numbers count down, my little flat fills up with stuff. DVDs I never get to watch, CDs I never find the time to listen to, mini-disks I never can decide to fill. And the more my little flat fills up with all this stuff , the less it seems like my little flat any more. But that's all right, because I barely get the chance to be in it anyway, what with commuting, eating, sleeping. Because if I don't get my eight hours sleep, then I'll be no use to anyone, and the letters might get filed away with the wrong date in blue biro in the right hand corner. And then how would they know when to shred them?

And if there was something else going on in the world, something bigger and more important and more exciting just out of the corner of my eye, well that was just too bad. I was far too busy to pay any attention to that.

Until the office blew up one Thursday and this little dark-eyed man came flying out of the rubble, all arms and legs and cuts and bruises.

Leave him alone. Don't get involved. The office has gone, and that means at least one day off without biting into your holiday. Find the boss, tell him where you'll be, and wait for someone else to sort it all out. That's what I should have done.

'Are you alright?' I asked, picking him up, and dusting him off.

He fixed me with those dark eyes, looking for all the world as if he'd known I'd be there (hell, as if he knew every event in my life that had led me there), and said:

'If anyone asks, you didn't see me.'

'I don't -'

Trust me,' he said, 'I'm the Doctor. But don't tell anybody that, either.'

And then he was gone, back into the smoke and the rubble.

Somehow, another thirty seconds has gone, and I'm still here. Somehow, it's still here too, looking up at me, frozen.

'Well?' says the Doctor.

It took them a grand total of two days and three hours to relocate each and every machine to the sub-office twenty yards down the road. Those twenty yards cost me an extra twenty minutes in commuting

time, but that was all right. I was back doing the same thing I had done for the last five years: all that changed was the colour of the shelves the letters slotted onto.

That, and that every morning or so someone had a new piece of gossip about who or what had caused the last office to spontaneously combust. But that was all right: I had other things to keep me occupied.

The numbers on the screen went down a little more, and my little flat gained a nice little PC, complete with CD-R, printer and modem.

Every day I went to the office and turned in time with all the other little cogs, and every night I hooked my little PC up with the rest of the world, and searched. Most nights I barely even got two hours sleep, let alone my blessed eight. But that was all right. I was making progress.

'First thing's first,' the Doctor said. 'Somewhere to stay.'

'Can't we stay in the TARDIS?' I asked, already knowing the answer.

He was already shaking his head, not even looking back to see if I'm looking. He knows I'm looking.

'Might draw attention to ourselves. Best stay incognito.'

So we find ourselves a guest house and book a room for the next few days: just the one - the Doctor never seems to sleep. He signs the register "Dr John Smith". They don't even ask me to sign anything.

Once we're alone, he explains the situation.

'Let's imagine,' he said: he always starts like that. 'Let's imagine that there's a corporation that's managed to get themselves some technology.

Years ahead of its time, alien technology. They've got their claws into every country in the world, selling this technology - this alien technology - to anyone who can afford the price. But no-one can afford the price: some day soon, the aliens are going to come and foreclose on the deal. Every sentient being on this planet will be their property.'

He fixed me with those dancing eyes of his - blue, grey, green, they never seem to make up their mind what colour they want to be.

'We're going to stop them.'

I don't even have a shadow of a doubt that we will. He's the Doctor: it's what he does.

'Just another day at the office,' I said, shrugging.

And it is, too: that first time I saw him, there was a corporation with some ahead of its time, alien technology. And he stopped them.

'What's the plan?' I ask, because he always comes up with the plans. I couldn't do anything without him.

He smiled, barely.

'You get some rest. I've got some work to do.'

Transcript of e-mails to newsgroup Japanese Pavilion from account Apricot Tuesday, and their replies.

AT: So you're saying you know about this "Doctor"? Who is he?
JP: I don't know the Doctor. Never heard of him. What gave you that idea? I mean, the idea of some *alien* space-time event setting history right, well that's crazy talk, isn't it?
AT: I never said he was an "*alien* space-time event".
JP: I didn't say you did. All I'm saying is, *if* he existed, well he'd probably be the kind of near Godlike creature that could see the flow of history like it was yesterday's newspaper. He'd be some unstoppable force that nobody in their right mind would want to get in the way of. Maybe because of what would happen if you got in his way, but mostly because nobody who wanted the universe to be right - to be the best it can - would want the Doctor out of the way.
JP: But wouldn't you say that someone - some*thing* - like the Doctor would

have the nowse to keep an eye on what people were saying about him?
JP: Oh, yeah, definitely. I bet he'd urge people who's met him to say "Nope, never heard of the Doctor" - but I still reckon he'd pop up every now and then, just to check his friends were being as good as their word.
JP: Oh, of course. But they'd be bound to be a couple of people who knew just enough to spot him.
JP: From his IP address, I'd guess.
JP: If he was testing them.
JP: *If*.
AT: Are you saying you know the Doctor's IP address? What's his e-mail addy?
JP: The Doctor? Nope, never heard of the Doctor ;)
JP: Doctor? Who he?

Transcript as downloaded by email account John Smith ends.

I can see my hand holding the gun. I can see the alien on its knees in front of me. I can see the red welt on the Doctor's arm, where the alien grabbed him just a little too roughly before throwing him to the floor.

'Well?' the Doctor repeats.

E-mail sent to account Apricot Tuesday by account John Smith.

JS: I think we should meet.

He woke me up around five in the morning the next day. Same routine as always: I'm dead to the world and he vanishes to arrange everything. I mean, doesn't he ever sleep? Experience would say no: he's the Doctor. He saves worlds. You can't do that in your sleep.

But he still needs me for some things.

'I need your help,' he said.

'Let me guess,' I said. I don't need to be there to know what's happened.

'You've located the alien's technology, and you've figured out how to destroy it. But you need me to get you into the building.'

'That would be the quickest way of putting it,' he said, looking almost like he was sulking. He'd prefer it, I'm sure, if I gazed at him adoringly and let him take a couple of hours telling me how clever he's been.

I don't even think about it any more.

'Let's go.'

I can see my arm. Let's go back.

Getting into the building was easy. It's always easy - the whole world seems to have security systems like the ones they had at work. Before the Doctor blew it up. I suppose it's understandable: we've been sticking pretty exclusively to twentieth century Earth, and work was the leader in its field. The only thing that isn't understandable is why The Doctor needs a pleb like me to bypass the system for him: surely the big bad force of nature (should be able to do it himself. I suppose he just wants me to feel useful, like I can make a difference. Yeah, cheers, Doctor.

Once we're in, all hell breaks lose. Finding the weapons cache is easy - the Doctor knew right where it was - and while he whirled around connecting this wire to that, reversing the polarity of the whatsit and tweaking the power cells of the whodyacallit I just sort of . . . phase out. It's always like that when

the Doctor's at work: I just end up feeling sleepy, probably in sympathy.

Then the next thing I know is tall, green and nasty has appeared from nowhere and is giving the Doctor the whupping of his lives. For some reason, looking at the alien reminded me of my boss.

The Doctor was losing big-time. But that was all right: the alien was ignoring me. It's all down to me.

'If you have a God,' the alien says, 'I would make your peace with it.'

Somehow, thirty seconds pass.

It's all down to two wires, one red, one blue. Touch them together, and the whole thing goes kaboom! The Doctor's holding them, one in one hand, one in the other. The air crackles. My palms feel damp, and I can feel the electricity spark across the sweat.

'This is the final cache. Once this is gone, the aliens will have no more weapons. They'll be powerless. Defeated.'

A pause.

'Do I have the right?'

I snort.

'Don't start that again, Doctor.'

He looks at me, shadows in his grey-blue-green eyes.

'I think we should talk.'

I can see the alien kneeling before me. I can see my arm holding the gun. I can see its eyes, locked onto mine. I can feel the Doctor inches away.

'Well?' he asks for the third time.

I can see the welt on my arm where the alien grabbed it just a little too roughly before throwing me to the floor. Only that wasn't me: that was the Doctor.

'Well?' the alien croaks. 'Will you kill me, Doctor?'

Only he's not looking at the Doctor. He's looking at me.

Let's go back.

There we were, walking down the street - little and large - two of us twice as real as death or taxes, but I bet you didn't even notice me, did you? I bet you couldn't take your eyes off the odd looking bloke swinging his umbrella and sniffing the air for evil. Let's go back.

'Earth,' I said, two steps behind as always. 'Again. Twentieth century. Again. Are you sure that thing's a time machine?' Let's go back.

So we find ourselves a guesthouse and book a room for the next few days: just the one - the Doctor never seems to sleep. He signs the register "Dr John Smith". They don't even ask me to sign anything. Let's go back.

One guy, alone in the street, dressed like a five-year old who's raided the dressing up cupboard.

'First thing's first,' he says to himself. 'Somewhere to stay.'

'Can't we stay in the TARDIS?' he asks himself, already knowing the answer.

'Might draw attention to ourselves,' he counters. 'Best stay incognito.'

One guy, alone in the street.

Let's go back.

Okay, so the world's about to end. The Doctor's sat in the middle of the floor, one wire in one hand, one wire in the other. You can practically feel the electricity begging him to touch them, to let it flow, to unleash the chaos. The air crackles with it, so much so that you'd think that's were the charge was, not in one red wire, and one blue. There's a big, green, scaly, unconscious monster in the corner,

blood trickling from behind its ear, where the butt of an alien gun struck him.

One second. Is he sweating? I am.

'Do you want to talk about it?' he asks me.

I consider. I don't even want to think about it.

'You met me at a pretty weird time in your life,' he says. I can do nothing but agree.. 'Your business was thriving. World sales were up. Because of your product. The product your new partners had brought to you. You'd never seen them, of course. Why should you? You're just a cog.'

A memory. I'm in the office. I need to see the boss - I don't know why: is it important? His secretary's missing - probably gone to the loo. That doesn't matter - I'll just take a peek and see if he's busy. I can always say Hilary said it was okay if he spots me. But he doesn't spot me. But I spot him. But not him. It.

In his office, in his suit, a green scaly giant, smearing on his face until suddenly it's not a green, scaly giant, but it's Mr Attwood, large as life and twice as ugly.

'Well, what could you do?' the Doctor says. 'You knew something was wrong. You knew this was an alien threat - truly alien - and it didn't take long for it all to fall into place. You knew it was wrong. You knew they had to be stopped.'

But what can I do? I'm just the fifth cog in the machine that turns with the fifth cog of the machine. I couldn't stop an alien invasion if you gave me the keys to the Millennium Falcon.

'And so you invented me. The Doctor. The dark alien for whom this kind of thing is as simple as burning the toast in the morning. The one who can make it right.'

And then it occurs to me. The wires aren't in the Doctor's hands.

They're in mine, one red, one blue.

'The gun is loaded. There's a finger on the trigger,' the Doctor says softly. 'But it's a big responsibility, pulling the trigger. And you can't avoid it forever, no matter how hard you try.'

And that's when it occurs to me.

'Well?' the alien croaks. 'Will you kill me, Doctor?'

Only he's not looking at the Doctor. He's looking at me.

And with a yell, I pull the trigger and watch as its brains suddenly decide they'd like to see the view from the window.

Okay, so the world's about to end. There I am, sat in the middle of the floor. Alone in the middle of the floor, one wire in one hand, one wire in the other. I can practically feel the electricity begging me to touch them, to let it flow, to unleash the chaos. The air crackles with it, so much so that you'd think that's were the charge was, not in one red wire, and one blue. There's a big, green, scaly, dead monster in the corner, most of the back of its head missing.

One second. I'm sweating. And I'm thinking.

Is there a part of me - a part buried God knows how deep - some small part that knows (even if the rest of me doesn't) how to reverse the polarity of the neutron flow?

Dr. Who and the Zodiac of Death

by David Bishop

The year is 1990. The BBC has passed on the chance to make a 27th season of Doctor Who, considering the long-running science fiction series to be past its peak. Then, a major surprise - an independent television company swoops to acquire all rights in the franchise. Just six months later, the first episode of a new look Doctor Who - now renamed Dr. Who - is broadcast on ITV, with a special effects budget bolstered by commercial sponsorship. Here is a scene the highly controversial première.

The stone courtyard stood silent and empty, as if waiting for someone - or something. A wheezing, groaning noise rent the air and the laws of physics turned inside out for a moment. While Einstein was busy turning in his grave, an impossibility appeared in the middle of the cloistered space. It was blue, it had a flashing light on top and it came from another time.

It was a Ford Mondeo.

The passenger door sprang open and a young woman emerged from inside the vehicle. She had a heart-shaped face, form-fitting black clothing and a jacket with the word ACE emblazoned across its back in garish script.

'Professor, this is the worst one yet! You said you had fixed the chameleon circuit. Now, every time we arrive somewhere new, the TARDIS takes on the perfect disguise for the last place we visited!'

A small man emerged from the driver's seat, clutching a straw hat and umbrella. He was clad in a white Armani suit, the label clearly visible near the cuff of one jacket sleeve.

'Now then Ace, it's perfectly understandable if the old girl is having a few teething troubles. She had been stuck in the shape of a police box for so long, I think she almost prefers it!' The little man smiled at the incongruous motorcar, his eyes gleaming with an alien intelligence. 'And don't call me Professor.'
Ace rolled her eyes in exasperation. 'Sorry, Doctor. So where are we now and why are we here?'
'To prevent a catastrophe,' he replied. 'Come on - we don't want to miss out on the canapés!' Linking arms, the pair of time travellers marched through an archway towards an imposing stone building.

The party was just warming up. Aliens of many races mingled in a vast chamber lavishly decorated with gold and precious gems. Ace whistled as she surveyed the decor.

'Someone's spent a bob or two on this place.'

The Doctor nodded vigorously. 'Yes, but it's surprising what you can do with just a lick of paint and some expert guidance. B & Q has got a full range of products which can turn any place into a palace.'

Ace stared at him. 'What are talking about?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I don't know. The words just came out of my mouth before I could stop them.'

'Well be careful what you say, okay? We're here to steal the Zodiac of Death, not hand out do it yourself tips, remember?' Ace looked around at the other guests. 'How about we split up, see what we can find out. I'll meet you on the other side of the room in 15 minutes.'

Before the Doctor could reply, the young woman had already moved into the crowd. The Time Lord set off in the opposite direction, determined to get to the bottom of this mystery.

Twenty minutes later, the Doctor was more confused than ever. On his way round the left edge of the room he had engaged representatives of several alien species in inane conversation that was entirely beyond his control.

The Time Lord found himself offering WD-40 to a Cyberman with creaking joints, suggesting Tesco's range of gourmet cooking ingredients to an Androgum and advocating the Bird's Eye range of frozen foods to an Ice Warrior. It was beginning to worry the Doctor.

'Well Professor, how did you do?' Ace asked as she appeared from a circle of aliens animatedly discussing the merits of Coronation Street.

'Badly. Something very strange is happening here, Ace.'

'You're telling me! I just had a giant ant wanting to discuss the merits of Black Flag fly spray.'

'A Zarbi. The giant ant was a Zarbi.'

'Whatever, it was well weird.' Ace looked at the Doctor with concern. 'How are you feeling?'

The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'As if I'm not in control of my own thoughts or words. And I'm getting a splitting headache. I could really do with some Panadol.'

'I've got Aspirin,' Ace offered, pulling a packet for pocket. 'They come in this perfect travel-sized dispenser.' She clasped a hand to her mouth in horror. 'Now I've started doing it too!'

'There's some greater force at work here,' the Doctor decided. 'Since when did all these species gather in the same place at the same time? It's impossible. It's almost as if they've been brought together here for some secret purpose. Perhaps someone on Gallifrey has reactivated the Time Scoop - but who? And why?'

'I don't know but this place is giving me the creeps, Doctor. I want to get out of here - right now.'

'You know, it's stressful moments like these that I feel like lighting up a good cigar. And when I want to smoke, I smoke a Hamlet,' the Doctor announced to no-one in particular.

'Gordon Bennett, you don't even smoke! What are you on about?' Ace demanded. 'I'm getting you out of here before this gets any worse.' She grabbed him by the arm and tried to drag him towards the nearest exit. But their way out was blocked by an imposing figure in ornate garb.

His face was swarthy and green, with scales glistening in the candlelight.

'I can't allow you leave the room. Not before you sample some of our unique cuisine.' His voice was deep and imposing, full of command. The tall alien snapped his fingers and a servant appeared, carrying a silver tray laden with mysterious, gold-encased objects.

The Doctor stepped in front of his companion. 'It's alright Ace, I can handle this.' The Time Lord turned back to look at the fierce alien blocking their escape. 'What do you want?'

'Just try one. You don't know what you're missing until you've had one of these very special delicacies.'

The Doctor gingerly took one of the objects and regarded it with suspicion.

Slowly he unwrapped the foil coating and examined the contents. Finally, with a last glance at Ace, he placed it inside his mouth and bit down.

'Well, what do you think?'

"Why, Draconian Ambassador,' the Doctor said politely. 'With these Ferrero Roche you will be spoiling us!"

THE END, MERCIFULLY

Hi, I'm
A C E

The Rainbow Man

by Robert Smith

It was happening again.

Vicki flattened herself against a wall as the soldiers ran past. She knew they had about as much idea of the cause as she did, but it probably did them good to be active. This time it was one of the nursing staff. That made five military personnel and seven medical staff to be affected. All in the past eight days.

No one was really sure what was causing the attacks and there didn't seem to be any recognisable pattern. It usually began with the dreams, but those affected started screaming about things that they couldn't possibly have seen. Things that no human could have seen.

The first soldier to be affected had quietly and calmly walked up to the eighth floor of West Wing and hurled himself through a window. A munitions expert had tried to blow himself to kingdom come. Dr Glanville's screams had almost incited a riot of their own.

Sometimes she was almost grateful to be assigned to the Rainbow Man.

She didn't really know why she called him that. The name had come to her in a flash, one day and seemed to fit. He'd been brought in shortly before she'd been transferred. Her predecessor had been the second victim. One of the generals had been convinced he was carrying some sort of virus that was causing the attacks, but none of the doctors could verify that. They'd found a number of medical anomalies, but nothing to explain the psychoses in people who were nowhere near the patient. There'd been a debate raging in the staff room about whether they had a new species that looked human, or a genetic misfit. The debate had ended three days ago when most of those involved had developed an insatiable longing for hot, sweet tea and had disappeared, muttering about —

'You are being reassigned,' said Dr Carter.

Vicki blinked. 'Sir?'

'I've reorganised the duty roster, so all your shifts will be handled by someone else. Pack only clothing and any essential items you need for an indefinite stay.'

'But sir! My patients... I can't just pack up and go... um, where am I going?'

Dr Carter looked up from his book and peered at her over half-moon glasses. He was the director of the institute, but his attitude meant that he acted like he was guardian of the solar system. He was a thin, balding man in his early sixties. The advancement of age had worn his face into a mask that seemed to sneer at anyone he thought beneath him. Which was just about everyone.

However, Vicki had come off worse than most of the staff at the institute. Dr Carter's mood swings were legendary and most of her colleagues either tried to argue back or stay out of his way as much as possible. Vicki always found herself too flustered in his presence to do either and so she invariably ended up infuriating the man with her nervousness.

'I told you, the duty roster has been reorganised,' said Carter, with rapidly diminishing patience. 'You've been assigned to a military ward, out on Bewong Prime. Your patients will just have to do without your fabulous abilities and rely on one of your substandard colleagues for the moment.'

Despite herself, Vicki felt her cheeks starting to flush. 'I didn't mean to imply that, I was just —' She felt her eyes starting to well up with tears. No. She wasn't going to cry in front of him. Not again.

'There'll be a few soldiers running around and you'll take your instructions from some people who've actually been out on the frontier. It won't be entirely dissimilar to your work here. Now, I've got an institution to run, so if your leisurely schedule permits it, I'd like to get back to work.'

'But our contracts don't say anything about assignment to military wards. You can't just reassign us. Why me?'

With a loud crash, Dr Carter threw his book on the table and leapt to his feet. 'You'll go because you're being paid to go,' he yelled. 'Like it or not, you're one of my employees and if I tell you to go,

then you do it. Or by god, I will come down upon you like a ton of bricks.' He dropped back into his chair and then resumed speaking in a normal tone. 'Apparently you performed highly on the mandatory psychological testing we gave you. I can't see it myself, but I suppose none of your lot are up to scratch these days.'

She bit back her response and fled from the room.

...Sontarans perverting the course of human history. Vicki blinked in surprise. She must have been daydreaming, but the memory had been far more real than any random passing thought. She'd been able to smell the disinfectant in the room and hear the background noises of people in the next room. Those sorts of details usually didn't manifest themselves so strongly in idle reminiscing. She shook her head to clear it and went into the first room on her daily round.

Patient One was a chubby, bearded, greying man in his fifties who looked like the first thing you thought of when you imagined everybody's favourite uncle. His round face looked as though it were the type that actually chuckled, in less serious circumstances. A thin wave of tiny hairs covered the top of his head, although the sides were still full with hair that was once curly. He looked up as she entered, with a determined expression and nervous eyes.

'They were here again, you know.'

Vicki sighed as she reached over for his pillow. Not the banana people again. 'Is that so?'

'Why won't they leave me alone?' he whimpered.

'I'm not sure,' Vicki replied. 'Perhaps if you pretended to ignore them?'

'They were playing music this time, you know.'

'Oh really? What kind?'

'Sad music. Slow tempo. Melancholy. Yes, definitely melancholy.'

Vicki grimaced slightly. This wasn't nearly as bad as the victims of the attacks, but was somehow more depressing.

'Nurse?'

'Yes, what is it?'

Without warning a hairy arm shot out of the bed sheets and grabbed her shoulder. The man's wavering eyes suddenly became firm, fixing themselves on hers.

'Oranges. I have to have some oranges. You've got to help me.'

Vicki carefully removed the hand, feeling the grip slacken almost immediately. 'I'm sorry, but we can't get citrus fruits this far out from Earth. I can have a look and see if there's a similar tasting substitute if you like.'

All the fight seemed to go out of him. He sank back on the bed, his eyes drooping as he mumbled into his beard. 'Never mind.'

Vicki moved away and started collecting the dirty laundry from the foot of the bed.

'Not the pyjamas,' he called out, suddenly. 'Don't take the pyjamas!'

'I have to take them to be washed. You'll get them back.'

'Don't you realise? It's the only thing that can stop them. Please. They'll be back tonight, I just know it.'

Vicki sighed again and handed him the blue and white striped pyjamas. 'All right, but this is the last time.'

She started to make her way out of the room. She glanced back at the patient who was clutching the pyjamas and happily nodding to himself. She shook her head a bit sadly and wheeled the trolley out.

Patient Two wasn't an ordeal at all, but that wasn't much compensation. He'd been brought in with the others, but he was clearly beyond hope for the foreseeable future. Most of the time he muttered silently to himself, like a child moving his lips to the words in a book. He'd occasionally burst into song, which was a little disturbing. His choice of music appeared to be hundreds of years out of date and was apparently cycling through the entire musical output of some band. It had been so catchy she'd actually looked it up. The Indigo Girls, late twentieth/early twenty-first century. No wonder she didn't recognise

it; she'd never been much of a fan of classical music.

Patient Two had been brought in clutching an archaeology textbook. They'd had to prise it out of his hands to get a look at it. The book was standard issue for any of a hundred Lunarversities in this sector alone, which didn't help much with identifying the patient. However what was most interesting was that one edge had an odd mark on it.

Not a mark, as such, but a sense that something was wrong. Everyone agreed that they could see something, but no amount of testing could confirm that there was actually anything there. She'd squinted sideways at it and recognised it at once as a blackened scorching... except that there really wasn't anything there and she'd never been able to —

She was trapped. Trapped on a planet with only a man, a monster and a sand beast for company. Her father was dead, killed in the crash. He never would make that new job on Astra.

...see anything since. Vicki reached out and steadied herself on the edge of Patient Two's bed. That was no memory she'd ever had. Long ago, her father and her sister, Tanni, had set out for Astra and had crashed on the planet Dido. She'd been left behind to finish her schooling, in the care of relatives. They told her that her father had died in the crash and Tanni had disappeared. In the weeks and months that followed, she'd wished she'd gone with them. Wished she'd died in the crash with her father, or imagined her sister being taken away on exciting adventures in space, by some benevolent alien. She'd wished so hard that sometimes she almost felt she'd gone in Tanni's place. But that was years... decades ago. It hadn't happened like that.

Vicki tried to pull herself together. She was a professional and she had a duty to perform. She gathered up Patient Two's laundry and left him singing. Singing softly to himself. Romeo and Juliet. The greatest love story of all time. Or was that Troilus and Cressida?

Steeling herself for an encounter with Patient Three, Vicki entered the final room. She stood still for a moment as her eyes adjusted to the minimal light levels. The patient had shown a distinct adversity to bright light. Nobody knew if this was a temporary or permanent affliction.

She looked down at the comatose form of the patient, but he'd used this ruse more than once. With a touch of pity she looked at the leather restraining straps. The patient had tried to escape no less than fourteen times. He'd hidden himself in the laundry basket, disguised himself as a guard and crawled fifty metres through the overhead ventilation system, only to emerge in the officer's mess. All without uttering a sound. He was like a sleepwalker, going through the motions without any conscious awareness. She wondered what sort of life he must have led if this was his default setting. For all she knew, he could be a violent criminal, used to escaping justice. Somehow, though, she wasn't convinced.

The first thing she'd noticed was his eyes. They weren't blank and bemused like Patient One's, although he had clearly suffered a similar loss of memory. No, the eyes were bright and alive, seeming to bore into her, right into her soul. She flinched suddenly, remembering the dark secrets that had come unbidden to the tip of her mind the first time she'd gazed into those deep blue eyes.

Except that was the funny thing, as she'd told Carolyn Elias in the staff room. She could have sworn they were green the first time, but they were clearly blue on second glance.

Then there were the clothes. Although dirt covered and somewhat charred like the others, the Rainbow Man's eccentric outfit had survived surprisingly intact. A beige cravat had been tied flamboyantly around a winged collar, disappearing into a brown waistcoat, which had itself been topped off with a green velvet jacket. Grey trousers had shined through from the dirt. She'd even taken it upon herself to have the outfit cleaned and returned to his locker.

Long, wavy hair encircled a solid, bony face. A long, straight nose hovered above sensuous lips and a strong chin. If it weren't for the fact that he scared the hell out of her, Vicki thought that she wouldn't have minded getting to know him better. She really wouldn't have minded that at all.

Vicki sighed, stirring herself from the reverie. It wouldn't do to start thinking of her patients that way. She reached over and gently lifted his head to replace the pillow. His hair was remarkably —

Jealous, of course she was jealous. Jesus, Mike, I'm a human being too, she wanted to yell at him. But

she didn't. She'd suspected, of course; for quite a while. But she'd hoped that if she pretended nothing had happened he'd stay, he wouldn't leave her, for God's sake she needed him. And now here he was, mumbling at her that he'd found true love; that he wanted her to be happy for him; that they'd always be friends. She used to think that mumbling of his was cute, eccentric even. Now all she wanted to do was scream at him, tell him that he was a cheating bastard, that he deserved to die alone and unhappy and for crying out loud speak up. But no, she answered, she wasn't jealous, she understood. They both had their careers, after all. They'd both been growing apart, it could happen to anyone. She didn't mind, really. It was for the best, for both of them.

...soft, as though it were silk. With an audible cry, Vicki tried to jump back from the bed. Her sleeve caught on something, twisting her awkwardly, the catch on the restraint pulling. How the hell had that happened? She was a professional, she told herself, desperately trying to keep her legs from giving way. She kept her private and her professional lives separate. But it had been so real.

Her body back under control, the adrenaline high diminishing, she looked down at the patient. Who was he? Memories like that don't just appear and certainly not memories buried that deep. She'd been that close to the patient before and he'd been as silent as ever. Just those eyes on her, pleading with her to undo the restraints, just a buckle, it won't hurt anyone, you won't get in trouble.

With a start she realised that those green eyes were watching her from the bed as she gazed at him. She quickly averted her eyes from his, glancing down at the restraining straps. However, as she did so, she noticed something a little strange about the way they were affixed around his body. Damn, that's what she must have caught her sleeve on. She reached out to tighten the buckle.

In a lightning quick movement, the man leapt up from the bed, sheets flying as he tumbled backwards. Landing on his feet in a catlike crouch, he stared at Vicki. She started to back away, wondering just how dangerous he could actually be. In a single bound, he leapt for the window. Raising his arms to protect his face, he burst through. Tinted glass shattered into a million fragments.

Recovering her wits, Vicki rushed to the window, half afraid of seeing the broken and awkward body eight floors below. With a start she realised that somehow he'd made the jump across to the slanted roof of North Wing. Hell, that was twenty metres away and a storey below. He can't see out the window from his bed, she thought to herself. Which means that he must have judged that distance in a fraction of a second and then hurled himself across.

She watched in fascination as the man scrabbled onto the tiles of North Wing, his bare hands and feet somehow managing to propel him up the 45 degree slope.

The Rainbow Man had made it to the apex of the roof before the ground soldiers determined where the sound had come from. She could make out a number of them mouthing urgent instructions into their communicators and imagined the sudden rallying of interior hospital soldiers, scrambling towards North Wing.

She couldn't see him any more. That meant he'd either found a way inside or, heaven help him, was trying to descend the tiled roof on the far side. For all she knew he was planning to scramble down the sheer face of all seven stories of North Wing.

Vicki stood staring out the window for a while, wondering if the patient had been a genetically modified experiment gone wrong. She heard some commotion and with a start realised that it was coming from the corridor outside the room. She turned as the soldiers dragged Patient Three back into the room, his prostrate form suggesting that he had lapsed into one of those comas that Dr Haymet swore was self induced.

The soldiers switched on the overhead light as they entered, and manhandled him to the bed. She was about to reprimand them for disobeying the lighting directions when she realised that there were perfectly adequate light levels outside. Just how long had he been planning this escape attempt?

The soldiers tightened the straps and after a brief discussion, two of them elected to remain in the room. Vicki looked disapprovingly at their weapons, but neglected to comment, turning to her patient.

Those blue eyes were staring at her again, pleading with her. I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do, some way I could get you out of this. To cover her embarrassment, she tried talking to him.

'You gave us quite a fright there, you know.'

The Rainbow Man simply looked at her, not a muscle moving in his face.
'We're not here to hurt you, we only want to help you get better.'
Green eyes, watching.
'The straps, the guards... they're for your own safety.'
If she hadn't been told about his unusual respiratory system, she would have sworn he wasn't —

We must have changed the future... we must have done! Had they really jumped a track in time? How exciting. Time, like space, although a dimension of itself, also has dimensions of its own. These Xerons needed her help to organise a revolution against the nasty Morlocks. She could reprogram the armoury computer; lead them in a bid for freedom. Everyone had the right to be free, didn't they?

...breathing. Behind her, one of the soldiers on duty let out an audible wail. She twisted round to see him on his knees, a single tear meandering down his face. His eyes were raised heavenward, his body shaking. She turned back to her patient. Just what was he?

The taller of the two soldiers had come over to stand next to her, staring down at the comatose form for a moment. With jerky, robotic movements, he reached out and began to undo the straps. Vicki put her hand on his arm to ask him what he was doing.

With a grunt, the soldier grabbed her and put his weight behind a throw. For an instant she caught sight of his face. His face was unnaturally calm, as though he were asleep or in love. The next thing she knew, she was flying across the room and crashing into the far wall.

'What are you doing? You can't release him, we don't know how dangerous he is, we have our orders.' The words came out in a tumble.

The Rainbow Man's eyes flicked open suddenly, but Vicki wasn't sure he could actually see anything. He leapt up and opened the locker next to him. He took a moment to struggle into his jacket and shoes, and then grabbed the remainder of his clothes. She watched the bizarre scene in disbelief. Partially dressed, the Rainbow Man moved towards the door. Trying to ignore the throbbing in her head, Vicki scrambled up and moved to block his escape.

The soldier by the bed pulled out a gun and aimed it at her. He was staring vaguely in her direction, but he wasn't focussed on her. It was as though his arm were moving of its own volition. Vicki froze. So the Rainbow Man was dangerous, after all. He was going to kill her for doing her job, for trying to help him, for saving those Xerons.

The Rainbow Man paused by the door and turned back. His eyes flickered slightly, as though he were starting to take in more of his surroundings. With a yell, the soldier dropped his weapon as though it were red hot. He clutched his hand and slumped to the ground.

Vicki stared into the Rainbow Man's eyes and those blue eyes stared into her.

'I was just trying to obey orders. Not that I even agree with them. I don't want to keep you here any more than you want to stay, but what can I do? I'm just doing my job. Well, not that it's even part of my contract, really. I shouldn't even be here... Who are the Xerons?'

The Rainbow Man cocked his head slightly, looking at her sideways. He was right. She really...

'Ah, Vicki. Excellent. How was your little tour of duty?'

'It was remarkably instructive, sir.'

'Good, good,' replied Dr Carter absently, rifling through some papers. 'I'm sure some discipline did you the world of good. I've got your next assignment here. Since you're so experienced, I thought we'd send you to another military ward. This one is a remote station orbiting a mining asteroid, but it's...'

'No.'

Dr Carter looked up at her, as though he'd never heard the word before in his life.

'Our contracts are quite clear. You had no right to send me to Bewong Prime and you have no right to send me, or any of my colleagues, to any military wards at all.'

Dr Carter leapt to his feet and flung his papers to his desk. They didn't have the desired impact and instead just blew about. 'I don't care for your attitude, Nurse. You are one of my employees, so if I say

you're going, then by God, you're going.'

Vicki stood perfectly still, but kept eye contact. 'If you'd like to renegotiate our contracts, you can talk to our union representative, who I'm sure would be happy to organise a nursing strike and bring this institution to a standstill. Until then, you cannot reassign us illegally.'

Dr Carter looked as though he were about to have a heart attack on the spot. 'I've had enough of you and your ideas. Your contract is terminated. I want you out of the building by midday, or I'll have you thrown out.'

Vicki shook her head. 'You can't fire me, Dr Carter. And if you try, I'm sure your superiors would be very interested to learn that you sent me on an assignment in direct violation of my contract. I'd be happy to perform any legal duties you require of me, just as I always have.'

Dr Carter's face had turned an alarming shade of red. His mouth moved comically, but no words came out. Without quite knowing what to do, he sat down suddenly.

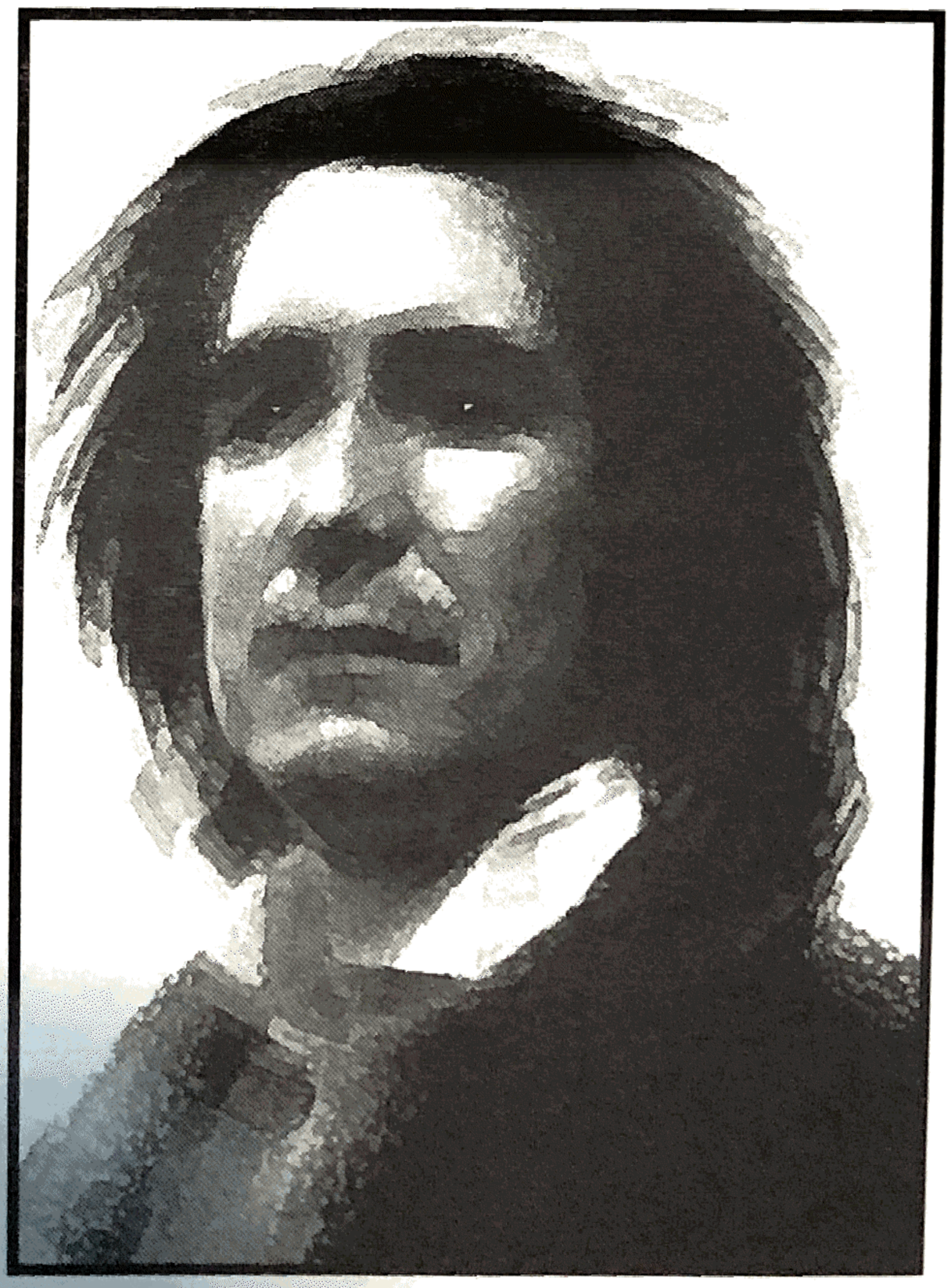
Vicki smiled briefly and then turned to leave. 'I can see you'll need some time to find me a new assignment. When you have some duties for me, let me know. I'll be talking to our union representative. Oh, and I don't advise you trying to bully anyone else into taking that military assignment.'

...shouldn't be here. She gasped in surprise. How was that possible?

The Rainbow Man was nowhere to be seen. She rushed to the window. Far below, she could see movement. He was simply walking towards the gate. A few soldiers were slumped on the ground in his wake, looking like sleeping children from this distance. A few were still conscious, but were staring at their weapons in disgust. The Rainbow Man continued walking.

As he reached the gate, the tiny figure turned back and seemed to stare straight at her. She was sure that any normal person wouldn't be able to pinpoint her in the window, but somehow she knew the Rainbow Man was aware of her presence. He turned and passed through the gates. An alarm rang out, but no one seemed to respond.

Vicki smiled to herself. There was a lot of work to be done. Reviving those soldiers, for one thing. Then she was heading home, and she had a pretty good idea what she'd say to Dr Carter when she got there. After that... well, maybe she'd go looking for those Xerons who needed her help.



Analysis

by Mark Clapham

'Think of something memorable you've seen,' I ask, tapping my pen against the desk. 'Something that may not have seemed too significant at the time, perhaps, but which you have revisited many times since in your mind.' Not the most subtle of techniques, but for the more difficult cases subtle techniques can be worthless.

'I was in Chicago during the height of the depression,' says my patient, staring blankly at the panelled ceiling of my office. 'I was passing a line of men queuing for soup, when a fight broke out amongst some of those men. I tried to intervene, but a crowd formed around the combatants, starving wretches screaming for blood as two men beat each other senseless, rolling in the dirt. I tried to force my way through the crowd, but I was elbowed back, by the time I pushed through it was too late, one of the men had gone.'

'And the other?' I asked, not that I needed to. But it was not the answer I was interested in, of course, nor the actual events. Rather it was my patient's observations that fascinated me.

'Dead,' the patient said flatly. 'His skull had been smashed on the sidewalk. There was nothing I could do.'

The patient sounded guilty, aggrieved even. 'As you say, there was nothing you could do. While what you witnessed was unpleasant, you have no responsibility for the actions of two men you never met.'

'No,' said the patient. 'Of course not.'

My patient, while good at keeping secrets, is often a terrible liar.

The patient is a man of around forty years of age, clearly of independent means as his payments for our sessions have been prompt and in full. He has unusually long, curly hair and dresses in a somewhat antiquated fashion, even down to a frock coat and cravat. This would suggest some kind of aristocratic lineage, although the only title he claims for himself is that of a doctor. Certainly his manner suggests a member of the upper classes; anecdotes such as the one above show an attitude to the lower orders that is paternal and somewhat condescending. For him, the world is one big country estate, and humanity merely the peasants that live on his land, and who need his guidance and counsel. The roots of this monomania are unclear, as the patient is reluctant to reveal personal detail. Neither has he elected to give a specific reason for his desire to consult me; his is an amorphous search rather than a desire to solve a specific psychological problem.

The patient has been informed that his intransigence in terms of personal disclosure is not helping matters, but his response is always the same, that these sessions are invaluable and well worth the payments he is making to me. How can I argue with that?

'Tell me about your dreams,' I say. It's a clichéd approach, but sometimes the obvious can reap the best results. 'What do you dream of.'

'Nothing.'

'You do not dream?'

'No, I do dream. Often I dream of nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Greyness, emptiness, nothing.'

To my surprise, after years of patients telling me their stygian nightmares, I find this image of oblivion disturbing.

Hypnotic regression reveals little. Apart from anything else the patient seems to somehow be in control of his subconscious as much as his conscious mind – I could swear he is concealing things, even when

in a deep hypnotic state. His memories, as uncovered, are also anomalous. Memories from the last century do not seem to be those of an adolescent, as if he came into this world fully formed. Pushing further back reveals nothing, and several attempts have yielded no results at all. In spite of my doubts about my patient's honesty, I do not believe this is evasion on his part, but rather a physical absence of long term memory. There could be some fascinating new condition here to discover, although I cannot imagine the patient allowing his neurological state to be studied, and such thoughts do not help his case one bit.

The patient suffers delusions of acute responsibility, and appears to be some form of monomaniac. Discussions of general matters always come back to his role in proceedings, his potential contribution. This would seem to be an unconscious urge – certainly there are no self conscious trappings of egomania, in fact he seems overly modest.

'What do you want from life, Doctor?' I asked bluntly. 'What do you enjoy doing with your time.'

'Helping others,' he replied. 'In what little ways I can.'

Oddly, this did not strike me as false modesty.

'Helping?' I queried.

'Helping. Saving lives, solving problems, that sort of thing. Fighting.'

'You were in the war.'

'No,' he said quietly. 'There were other battles for me to fight.'

'But surely the war presented an opportunity to help others, to fight the good fight? Even by helping to bring the war to a close lives could have been saved?' I realised I might be fuelling the man's delusions by postulating a grand intervention in the Great War on his part, but I found his attitude intriguing, and not a little irritating. I had fought in the trenches, only a shrapnel wound delivering me from the conflict, bringing me home after only a month's service. I had done my bit – why had the Doctor not done his?

'It wasn't my war,' he said simply, without any further justification. As if that was enough.

'Why not?' I demanded, angry in spite of myself.

He closed his eyes, and seemed frustrated by his own answers. 'I don't know.'

During one session, I accidentally knocked my tea cup off the edge of my desk with my elbow. Lax of me, I know. To my surprise the patient caught the cup, and placed it back on the desk gently. My surprise came because he had been lying on the couch, at the opposite end of the room, when I knocked the cup. Perhaps due to me not looking in his direction, being distracted by my own clumsiness, I did not notice him crossing the room. It seemed, from my perspective, as if the seconds between the cup being knocked and it hitting the floor had stretched, giving the Doctor time to cross the room and save the cup. Of course it could not have been anything of the sort, but as an exercise in personal perspective I find the whole event interesting.

My attempts at analysis have failed. This patient has decided not to continue our sessions. When I asked him why, his answers were obtuse.

'I feel I am not the kind of subject you can treat,' he said. 'I must find others to help me.' He seemed to have become uncharacteristically morbid. 'Or perhaps only I can help myself.'

I tried to point out that feelings of isolation provided good reason to continue our sessions, not bring them to a close, but he was not to be persuaded.

'The answers are out there. Or within me.' He paced the room, agitated. 'Either way I cannot find them sitting around here.'

And with that he shook my hand, thanked me and left.

While I believe there is nothing in the Doctor's personality that makes him a danger to himself or others, I cannot help but feel guilty that I failed to solve his problems, whatever they may be. He is clearly a deeply troubled individual and I cannot help but suspect that, no matter where he looks, he may never find the answers he desires. Perhaps they do not even exist.

THE FANTASTIC ADVENTURES OF DOC WHO BY JX "DOC" SMITH 76

9463247 ● 75c ● A COCKATRICE BOOK

THE PULP OF THE BLACK LOTUS DOCTOR WHO

Extract from *The Pulp Of The Black Lotus* By Simon Bucher-Jones

THE HEART OF THE DARKNESS

A Doc Who Adventure

By J. X. "Doc" Smith

A Cockatrice Book / published by arrangement with

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Chapter 1

MYSTERY UNDER THE EARTH

It was a broiling hot day in the biggest of America's big cities; and steam was pouring out of the gratings and the manhole covers like all the rats had kettles.

'Jeez,' Hoskin the gunsel said wiping a bead of sweat from his thick jowled face, 'you didn't tell me. You didn't tell me'.

'I didn't tell you what?' The voice was harsh, thrilling with power and yet inhuman, a tortured forcing of sounds into syllables. It was like a machine speaking: every note ripped from the throat. The shadowed figure hunched against the ironwork of the underground room, twitched as it spoke. It was a nervous, convulsing twitch.

'That we'd be up against Doc Who and his Trusty Companions; I've known hard men who've had their heads handed them messing with that yegg. And worse, folks who go against him just vanish plump out of this world like they get et up'.

Pimples MacHoolley the spotty stoolpidgeon broke in, 'He's right boss, they say Doc Who's father was a great scientist and that he gave his son a second heart: an atomic heart that won't stop beating till the sun goes out, and it boosts his strength till he's as strong as any man living, and twice as bright. They say you can see the light of that great heart shining out of his eyes!'

The shadow figure emitted a gurgling sneer, 'I fear not this luminous nemesis, for I am The Darkness, and where I walk all light is extinguished, remember that. Or would you have me re-introduce you to the Beast That Eats Light.' A scratching noise seemed to fill the underground chamber as if some great insect or segmented worm was moving just below the ground. A greater terror than the underworld's fear of Doc Who seemed to fill Gunsel Hoskin, and Pimples MacHooley. They had seen the awesome horror that the man who called himself The Darkness could unleash, and they would do anything to prevent its being used on them.

Doc Who made his headquarters, as the popular press had made known far too widely for his modest nature, on the observation floor of the second largest skyscraper in New York, he considered it architecturally superior to the largest, and besides he said it inspired him to work harder. A friendly rivalry between him and Clark Savage Jr had persisted nevertheless, just as it had with the unknown operator who had taken the identity of Lamont Cranston. Doc Who had traced the man's retina pattern - for the veins in the back of the eyes are as unique as finger prints - to a missing flyer called Kent Allard, but he suspected that too might be an identity The Shadow had only assumed, just as he himself had taken on this flamboyant role more out of necessity than choice.

He had no past other than the stories of his childhood, written in his own hand on a scrap of paper under hypnosis. A procedure that he candidly regarded with dubiety but which had at least garnered some results that, he felt intuitively, had to bear at least obliquely on the facts. He had come to the Americas after the Great War with no belongings but a crumpled suit: his childhood fable of an atomic heart, and a mysterious blue box. He had found the land of opportunity in the grip of apocalyptic events. Masked criminals were holding whole cities to ransom; the tools of the new science of the atom were being turned to weapons of extortion and greed. And he knew somehow that it was wrong. Not just immoral, not just nasty and evil and inhumane but wrong in a deeper impossible sense as if the fabric of the world was violated, as if it hadn't ought to be like

this. He had been on the Grav 109, when the giant Zeppelin Liner was attacked by the Red Hawk's sky bandits, he had held one of the trained vampire bats of the Vampire Prince at arms length in one hand until its strength ebbed first. And yet, he couldn't believe in them, any longer. He had gathered a crew of Trusty Companions around him. Men and women he could trust to fight the rising tide of evil; and yet even as he operated on Frank "Peepers" Hyde to restore his sight, after the fearful business of the Eyeball Destroyer, he found he couldn't believe in them either. Any more than he could believe that Sherlock Holmes had pressed the elixir Vitae wrestled from Fu Manchu into his hands charging him to guard it against the Power of the East; or that he had stood with Allen Quatermain and seem Hue-Hue the Monster, the last living Neanderthal, aside of course from his own Butler 'Ape'. He had found no peace in England or Europe, but in America he had found only madness.

Little did he know that brewing in the stygian deeps below the New York subway was a dark power that would bring a new terror to the....to the....to the...

J. X. "Doc" Smith ripped the paper out of the typewriter. How on earth was he going to make any progress with *The Pulp of The Black Lotus* if he couldn't get a grip on his characters? Heaven knows they only had a few characteristics each. Ape was, well, Apelike. Peepers Hyde had those scary eyes and his grandfather's curse that would turn him into Hyde by nature. Marolyn Minx, insisted on barrelling into her cousin's adventures with her explosives and her jive chat. And Doc Who himself had no character at all, or only as much character as J X Smith could find in himself. He decided to skip the set up scenes to write them in later. Just get the climaxes down.

Chapter 2

The Century Of Fear

He had exhausted the facilities of England; and his discoveries were horrifying. Conan Doyle confirmed his blood wasn't human; his fingerprints were not only not in Scotland Yard's new files but didn't resemble normal whorls either. In his chest the thud, thud thud of his telltale double heart beat out its reminder. Different, Different, Different. He could still remember the fear he had felt when reading Poe' s story for the first time. For the first time he could remember, anyway. Was he some surgeon's freak? A veritable Frankenstein creation. No one knew.

He had tried a dozen quacks and ninety nine nostrums, he had tried a drug which its backwoods dealer claimed came from Pluto – when the planet went by an inhuman name, he had tried mesmerism and hypnotism, and teslaism – the latter a brief electrical fad that went as quickly as it arrived. He had tried tantric sex. He had exhausted the facilities of a certain notorious house in Boston. Twice. He had learned a good many surprising things; but about himself he had learned nothing.

He had drifted into writing as, between the horrors that at times seemed almost to lay in wait for him, he had always drifted from one profession to another. He mastered each with casual ease but rose always only so far as a man with no past and no papers could rise. He made always only the friends that a reticent man might have. He never felt love (even his fictional alter-ego had known better than to imagine that love might have been on offer in Boston) or received a touch of a hand on his face. How could he, how could he offer himself if he didn't even know what he was. What if really he wasn't like Doc Who at all; what if he was like The Darkness, or the Red Hawk, or the Vampire Prince, of The Midget That Laughed, or Herr Doktor Harbinger? What made those gross and festering horrors pour out of him in ink like pus from a sore?

What if he was a horror of the old century living into the new atomic age?

Chapter 9

The Sewer God

'So the man with no name and the two hearts has come to pay me a visit.' The patch of darkness said. 'Don't you know who I am? Can't you guess. What does the hero always confront but himself, himself or his fears, himself or his father, the fear of death, the fear of becoming the thing feared; the fear of being akin to the darkness? I am the Master of Darkness, boy'.

Doc smiled his tight, sad smile and the light that seemed to come from his deep-set eyes flashed a cool green in the blackness. In moonlight there is too little light for colours to be seen but somehow the light that his eyes intensified, or generated, still gave the impression of possessing it even in that pit.

'There is nothing you can confront me with I have not seen, for light must penetrate darkness'.

The shadow-thing tittered, unwholesomely. Images of black light; negative on the mind's eye, chalk on the night sky of the soul, hit the Doc like a splatter of hot lead. A world of Vampires: sucking the energy from the cosmos to power their own experiments; condemning the others of their own kind who preyed merely to survive. 'Rivals,' the voice hissed, 'not to be tolerated'.

A star: a black jewel in the white firmament, the sun of a peaceful race. They worshipped the vampires, learned their vile arts. Their reward; their sun torn into a white hole, sacrificed for more power. The rulers of this evil realm: Nolissar, Agemo, and the Void. Agemo they fed to the things in the hole, a piece at a time, part ritual, part boys pulling wings off flies for sport. Nolissar, the Void tricked: entombing him alive, with only the malice of the traps and games around his fetid tomb to while away the stinking eons. The Void wanted to live forever, beyond the vampire span of eternity, beyond the last drop of mammalian blood on any world. It foresaw the blood-drought, its kin drying and dying in the dust; everything else eaten from alpha to omega. It foresaw the scavenging vermin from other universes rummaging among their bones. It conceived a plan. Where is the seat of immortality?

The question scrawled itself in white letters of fire in the black interior of Doc's skull. He guessed the fiend was using subliminal strobes; sub-sonic inductance; hemp fumes in the air, but still he felt compelled to answer. 'Fu-Manchu once told me it was the head, not the heart that was the seat of life, of course I had just shot him through the heart. Twice. With two guns. Four bullets in all. He laughed and walked away.'

'He knows much for a human,' the shrouded figure leered, 'but in this he was mistaken. The Heart is the life. The Void arranged that its heart should never die but should live on pumping its putrid black bile through the veins of a million species. Living – possessing – continuing, until...'

'I see where this is going,' Doc said, 'I suppose it was the strange heart that my father found encased in that green meteorite, that heart that crackled with atomic fire, yet weighed no more than a mass of bakerlite.' He did not say that he had only dreamed his father and the strange plastic rock from space. He kept that back, secure somehow in the belief, irrational at best, that knowing it to be a myth empowered him somehow. That its truth could not be lost as long as it was a story. That its horror did not have to be faced as long as it was a story.

'Yesssss, and while you have resisted for a time its evil history, its perverse arabesque design, written across space and time, soon it will claim you once more. You will be The Void, the thing that travels the stars and brings chaos. You will be not my foe but my bro..'

Doc drew his autofirer and clicked by feel the magazine canister to the magnesium flares. 'But

what if I choose to bring not chaos, but light?' He asked, and fired.

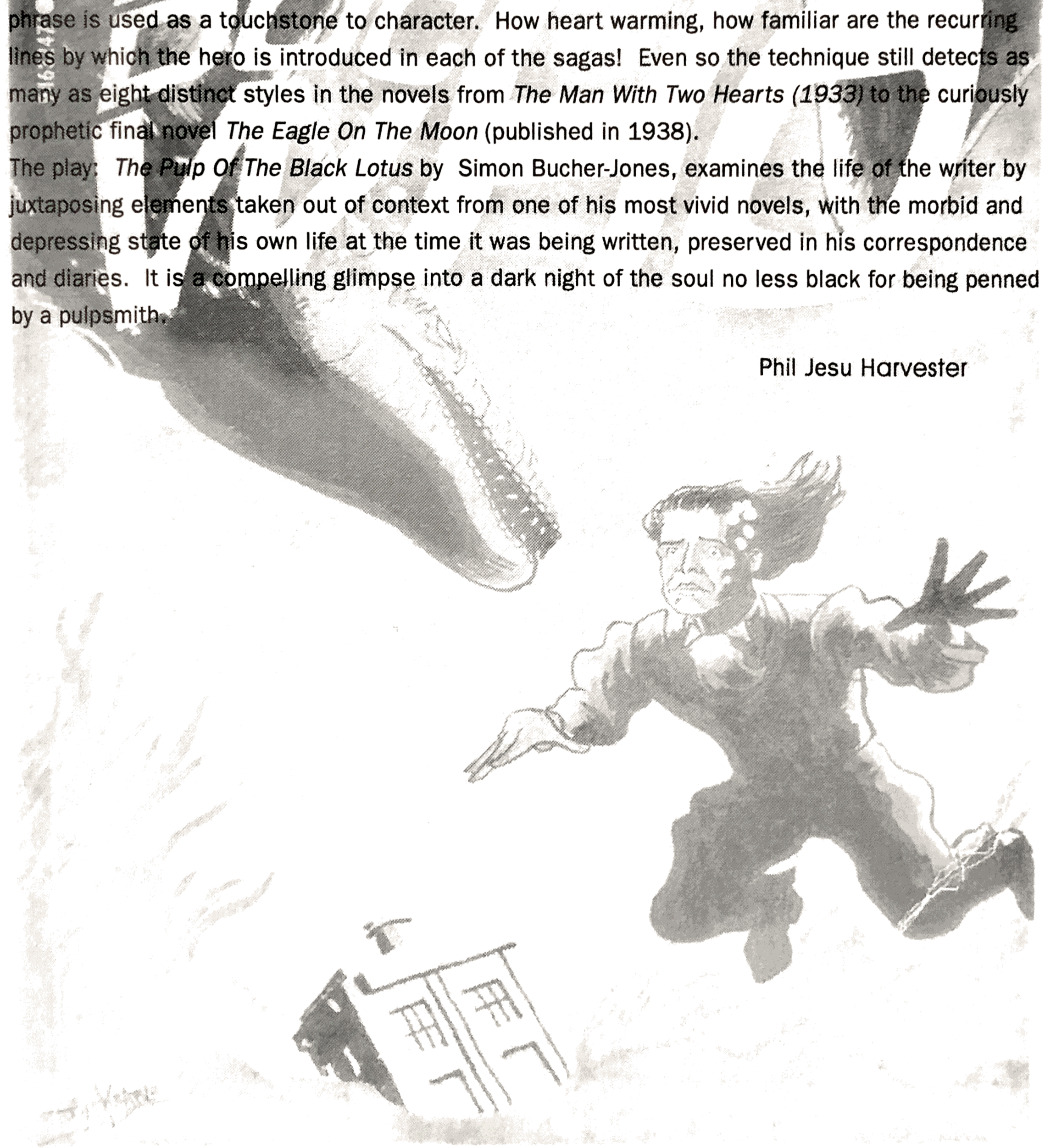
And then what? Doc wondered. Thematically the light ought to force back The Darkness. This ought to be some sort of exorcism to get these stupid silly devilish, bed-wetting dreams down on paper. Maybe if he lived long enough, and it seemed he would, he would pay a surgeon, someday when surgery killed less surely, to cut out his extra-heart. Exorcise, excise its maddening beat, and find, what? Something built of living plastic? A pyramid of glowing spheres? A tiny neotenous twin gibbering in his chest wall, kicking its tiny tiny feet against his rib cage. The heart of a Jackal? He had searched his body carefully for a minute 666, just to be sure. Then not finding one he had considered having one tattooed on, but had found the idea of needles curiously hard to bear. They made the centre of his chest ache. Despite Holmes' example he had found no respite in cocaine. It had been a long decade. Soon he felt, fiction would fail him. It had kept the night at bay for eight years, it had been his best friend, and his bread and butter, but had it really been a life?

Afterword; The Dark Prince of the Pulps.

Students of the pulps talk in a hushed voice of Walter Gibson and Lester Dent the writers who (mostly) - for their seats were sometimes occupied by lesser men - toiled behind the corporate pen-names of Maxwell Grant and Kenneth Robeson; the supposed chroniclers of Doc Savage and The Shadow. But what of the third member of this metaphysical triumvirate; this trinity of the hot-metal typewriter; this hidden and masked fraternity of authors. Who was J. X. "Doc" Smith, the writer who penned in the space of five red hot years no less than one hundred and fifty magazine novels: was he even one man? Computer aided literary analysis is a slippery tool at best. It makes one man of Shakespeare and Marlowe; dissects others, makes the bible and Moby Dick into equally valuable tomes of prophecy. Turned on the pulps it is perhaps flustered by a form in which the conventional phrase is used as a touchstone to character. How heart warming, how familiar are the recurring lines by which the hero is introduced in each of the sagas! Even so the technique still detects as many as eight distinct styles in the novels from *The Man With Two Hearts (1933)* to the curiously prophetic final novel *The Eagle On The Moon* (published in 1938).

The play: *The Pulp Of The Black Lotus* by Simon Bucher-Jones, examines the life of the writer by juxtaposing elements taken out of context from one of his most vivid novels, with the morbid and depressing state of his own life at the time it was being written, preserved in his correspondence and diaries. It is a compelling glimpse into a dark night of the soul no less black for being penned by a pulpsmith.

Phil Jesu Harvester



TIM KEABLE

EUCATASTROPHE

MagsLHalliday

THERE were still a few parks left in London, but the lungs of the city were cancerous. The remaining trees were choking: overdosed on the very carbon they'd been planted to control. The Serpentine was the dark ochre of bile, sluggishly moving through the once green pleasure grounds. At night, the park was a no-go area, ruled by the blade gangs and the child-whores. By day it was scarcely less safe and only the foolish would cut across Kensington Gardens to save time. It could have been the dark, hypocritical days of Queen Victoria and Red Jack's reign. It wasn't.

The man in the ragged velvet jacket strolled through the park in the fading winter light, taking a snaking path through the thin scrubby grass. A scarlet silk handkerchief was tied across his mouth and nose, although he knew perfectly well that his lungs could assimilate the defiled air. It was just more comfortable this way. He also found it more comfortable to ignore his shadow and the implicit threat to his world. The man considered turning round and confronting the young blade-boy dodging through the thin cover, to talk him into new ways. Maybe once he would have.

He took a few twisting turns, following a path taken many times before. That was in different lives though. An empty plinth stood in what, when the undergrowth was still heavy, had been a small grove. The bronze statue, like most in London, had been ripped from its perch, smelted down and sold in some dodgy scrap yard somewhere. He crouched in the filth that had blown up against the cracked and tagged stone, let his fingers trace the worn epitaph.

I'm on my way to the theatre as the two kids run by. Neither they, nor the coppers half-arsedly following them, notice me. Camouflage. No one notices a skanky girl in retro-rave gear. I stare at them, wanting to reach out and rip the hideous Grey masks off and stuff them into their taunting mouths. I don't have the energy.

A hundred years ago, we would be the creatures made ridicule of, turned into masks and costumes and twee commercial crap. The Other made safe through familiar ridicule. A few hundred years ago and we were the ones staring in popular dramas and literature. Fearsomely attractive. Heavenly creatures. Now the little sods use rubber masks with voice scramblers in to disguise themselves as aliens whilst they turn over offies. But I bet they still wet their pants when the Real Thing turned up in Trafalgar Square a few years back, even after putting all their belief into them.

I'm still standing in the street, letting the grey slush eat at my leather boots.

Think too damn much, that's your problem.

Thank you, mother. The clumpy old cow is still echoing round my head, even though she died not long after I came out to her. She's right though. No point standing here ruining good clothes. Tonight's *the* night. I need to get over to the theatre; get ready. I really, really hope I'm not going to die on that stage tonight.

The vehicles are lined up on the street, drivers impatiently waiting their turn to drop as near as possible to the doors. Can't risk the poor darlings' health by exposing them to any more of the outside world than possible. The theatre has an airtube set up, so as the families walk in they feel reassured. Protected. Safe from the world they've created. Many of them are pulling down their filter masks as they reach the supposed safety of the tube, looking relieved to be away from the atmosphere.

I go past on the other side of the road, noticing that the people are keen to avoid noticing me. Just another shadowy figure to shun: a bit scuzzy, bound to be infected in some way, what with being exposed to the great outdoors. The hover cars are dumping people faster and faster as I slip past them to the alley that leads to what was once the stage door.

"Oi!"

When I look up Arse, Dodger and Sketchy Matt are grinning down at me from the sloping, angular roof.

"What the hell you doin' up there?"

"Best view, innit?" Sketchy says, shrugging. "What? Too high for you?"

"Sod off, I can get up there. Easy."

"Yeah? So I can just chuck this rope off then?" he asks, throwing the spider silk line away. It coils up into a sticky tangle, clinging to itself and to the litter blown up against the wall. Damn. I don't really want to spend most of my last energy getting up to that spot, but he's left me no choice.

I shrug. Both at him so he doesn't realise that it bothers me, and so that the old kevlar jerkin falls free of my shoulders. Freed, the fractal gossamers flick out. I remember when they were translucent rainbows, drying for the first time. Long ago, in an English summer. Or some such romantic bollocks. Now, they are the colour of a death's head moth: dead greys and grave brown. Camouflage.

I still only take three wing-beats to rise up the sixty feet to the roof, though.

"This is crud."

"No it isn't, Liam. And I've told you before not to swear."

Only my bloody mother would think crud was a sodding swear word. And this *is* crud, anyway. It isn't even worth swearing properly about.

The journey in was OK. The hovercar was going dead fast, well exciting. London's crummy though. Why come to this shitheap to see things when I've got all the Disney films in my room? I love that cell from Snow White with the dirty drawing in. You can only see it on the SDVDcell edition, though.

The car got stuck in traffic, which was boring, and mum kept pointing stuff out to me through the windows, which was even more boring. Huge stupid buildings where people used to go just to see the bones of dinosaurs. What's the point? They died. They were the weakest and they couldn't survive so they're all dead. Extinct. Mum was getting all sad and talking about when she was a girl, but I was more interested in the other stuff I could see out the window. The stuff you don't get to see on the Discovery channel. I pulled faces at the people walking along at street level. Walking! How stupid is that? Someone in a kevlar jacket and stupid flight goggles flicked the finger at us as we start to land.

I stuck my tongue out at them, not that they'd see it.

"Crud. Crud. Crud." I whisper, kicking my feet against the seatback in front of me.

"William!"

Gods, she is pissed off with me. Using my full name and everything. This is, she's telling me for like the fourteen millionth time, a special treat for Christmas. Yeah, right.

There's a hatch on the roof, an old skylight. Dodger smashes the catch away from the frame with a half-brink and we're in, careful not to touch the iron of the catch. Matt pulls the skylight back in place but the frame is bent now and a chink of the real sky can be seen, such a dark blue you might almost forget it's not much brighter in the day.

We're on a narrow walkway running directly over the stage, with a load of ropes running through pulleys and huge flat canvasses just beneath us. Shit, but this is old stuff. Above is plain old rafters: none of the protection from the outside the spoilt toads paying to get in think they are getting. I go to the end of the walkway and look down the rope ladder there, pulling my goggles off to see in the muzzy light. I can see the theatre wings below, a couple of blokes ready at the ropes and people dressed up in the stupid stuff mum used to make me wear when I was a little human girl.

"I had a night dress like that," I tell Sketchy Matt.

"Changling," he sneers. Bloody Court git. Just cuz he's a pure blood. Thinks he's better than me. He's still up here hoping not to die, ain't he?

I'm turning to thump him when some of the ropes by our feet start snaking past. There's some unconvincing "ooh's" from the parents who have forked out to see a play put on in a real theatre and are trying to make their kids enjoy it so they can pretend things are like they used to be. Things aren't like they used to be. Our whole world is dead.

This is rubbish. The background is just painted bloody material. Why didn't they use holoprojectors? Mum sighed as the red curtain went up and we saw this grotty pretend room. When I started kicking the seat in front of me again, she nudged me and "William"ed me again.

Look, you can see the bloody wires! It's not real. It's stupid. I don't believe it. I wanted to go on a hoverboat trip round the flooded Dome for Christmas anyway.

We're the last, a whole species, a whole culture, reduced to a thief, two pissheads and a Changeling hiding out in a friggin' roofspace. It's important though. Tonight's the night we live or die. Midwinter's eve, no time for dying. The words will be spoken. The power will rise, fill us, ensure us another year's existence in this world. Or it won't.

Sketchy Matt tilts his head at me and holds out a hand, the best apology I'm gonna get. We hurry back along the walkway to the middle where Arse lies, his eyes closed, one hand traces the rhythm of the lines in the air. He's the oldest, barely survived this year, living off free soup and ethanol. Dodger takes my other hand and the three of us sit down to wait.

It didn't used to be like this. I remember: it's the one thing Changelings are valued for. We've got human time bred into our bones. I can understand past/present/future whereas the pure only see the now. I remember being a little human girl. I remember my wings growing when I was 13. Hiding them in shame, not knowing what was happening to me. I Changed. I become me, much to mother's horror. I went and found others, found confidence. One midsummer's night, I was introduced at Court. The Great Court where the old Queen lead the revels. Sketchy used to be an artist there but he doesn't really remember. I only know because I saw him there once. Before every inch of the world was mapped and touched by humans. Before the Court decayed and faded, no cranny left for it to hide in. Before it died.

The biggest pain in the arse of being a Changling, is that I can also look forward. I know what's going to happen. Arse, I think, has realised. He's old, real old. I think he's been sleeping in the ghettos so long he's started to think like the human outcasts surrounding him. Sketchy and Dodger, they know they've been drawn here, they can see their light fading. They're only just realising what that means though.

This is so boring. I could do my own anime version on my palmtop and it would look better than this. I'd have proper FX and everything. They're just actors. It's not *real*.

"Why, Tink, you have drunk my medicine!"

Now. The incantation begins now. There's a ritual, every line seared in our existence. Everything is connected. They must *want* it.

"It was poisoned and you drank it to save my life! Tink, dear Tink, are you dying?"

Yeah, right. The fairy's just a glowlight on a string anyway. Let it die. I'd like to see what they do then.

"Her light is growing faint, and if it goes out that means she is dead."

They must *want* to believe. They must hope there is some magic left in the world. Some inexplicable reality. Looking up, I can see the thin line of sky above. The smog shifts slightly and I think I glimpse a star winking. Oh Gods, let me live!

"She says–she says she thinks she could get well again if children believed in fairies! Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe! If you believe, clap your hands!"

This is rubbish. I'm not clapping. I fold my arms. Mum doesn't nudge me. I look at her because she should be telling me off, making me clap. She's crying but she's not clapping. I look round. No-one is clapping.

There!

Hear it?

One, just one. Clapping. Firm, clear, strong.

More starting up. Unsure. Following the one. Yes!

Opening my eyes, I'm still looking at the chink and the smog has really cleared this time and a star is dancing. I squeeze Sketchy's hand, then release it to wipe the tears out of my eyes.

Someone at the back started. Real loud. The actors had just been standing there looking lost. If it had been a proper interactive film they would have gone into the alt ending but it's just some old play. A couple of people near the bloke at the back joined in. Mum looked round and started quietly. I looked up at her like she was mad. I'd wanted to see what they would have done if no-one had clapped and now that's all spoilt. Mum looked down at me and smiled. I felt guilty. She wants to believe all this rubbish. She wants me to believe. Why couldn't we have gone on the boat trip instead?

Arse is gone. It came too late for the poor old sod. Nearly too bloody late for me. Dodger and Sketchy Matt have moved on already, with promises of booze and tricks to play. Wind-up merchants the pair of them. The fey equivalent of public school boys. Never been human. In ten minutes they'll have forgotten all this for another year, 'till they feel the pull again. I want to see. I got these bloody stupid human ideas of obligation. The curse of the Changeling. Past/present/future.

It's easy now. The power's racing through me, pulsing. I'm glowing, and I don't mean that as a sodding polite way of saying I'm sweating. I'm almost tempted to do the full-on light-sprite thing but it's been years since I tried shape-shifting so I settle for flying out the skylight and racing through the theatre foyer so fast the plebs think it's a December gale and hurriedly put their filter masks back on. He's at the back. Standing in the shadows. I can tell it's him, though. I'm drawn like a moth. He practically radiates belief and he's watching the play with excitement, caught up in the story.

"Wendy always grows up, you know." I whisper in his ear.

His shadow turns slightly before he does and then he's smiling at me.

"Peter doesn't."

I shrug. I want to touch him but I suspect I'd burn. He's not human, no matter what he's trying to pretend. He doesn't fit. He's had what, for lack of a better word, you'd call adventures. If you were pissed and trying to pass yourself off as a mysterious stranger, that is. I bet he doesn't call them adventures himself. Plus, there's that whole shadow thing: it's been making obscene gestures at me. I get mine to thumb its nose back which makes it do a double-take.

"Sorry, can't do a thing with it," the man whispers as if he was having a bad hair day. Hells. This is a bit more awkward than I thought.

"Thanks." I manage eventually.

He shrugs this time. He's older than he looks. A lot older. And I've met some bloody old things in the last two centuries. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. The otherworldliness, the ancient in the youthful body and the impudent shadow. Shit.

"To live," he says quietly, "will be an awfully big adventure."

I wonder if you're allowed to thump legends?

"Nice day for it." The young man remarked as they walked through the gardens.

"For what?"

"You really don't do small talk, do you, Compassion?"

She shrugged. The Doctor was walking ahead of them, leading them along a winding path towards a shrubbery. The sunlight was streaming down through the lime green leaves of the silver birches. The nearby lake was rippling as ducks sped towards a young girl throwing bread from the bank.

"It's a pleasant day," she conceded, "much better than when we were here a few weeks ago in the future."

Fitz didn't reply for a moment as he worked through her sentence. The Randomiser was making things even less linear than usual and the sentient time machine walking beside him seemed to take enjoyment from confusing him further. Oh, she meant when they'd stopped off in 20something-or-other. The Doctor had gone out with his perpetual desire to investigate. Been to see a play or something. Fitz was glad he'd stayed in with a video, pizza and some beer.

Turning a corner, they found the Doctor entranced with patting the head of a fawn. A bronze one that was part of a tableaux of animals with a little raggedy boy frozen in time as he danced amongst them, playing his pipe. Fitz and Compassion glanced at each other, then back the smiling, absorbed Doctor.

"He's just a big kid, really." Fitz remarked quietly.

"He'll have to grow up one day."

Caught in Margate – The Itching

by Matt Marshall

'Fitz, Fitz…'

Fitz opened a lazy eye as he heard his voice softly called out. He yawned and settled down to sleep again on the dusty old couch.

'Fitz, where are you? What's for tea?'

Fitz opened his eyes again and swore. He had forgotten all about it. Already he could smell burning coming from the kitchen. 'Bugger bugger bugger.' He unsteadily staggered over to the cooker, wafting away thick black smoke as he did so.

The Doctor waltzed into the room in that ever-so-superior way of his. 'I'm starving, Fitz.' he whinged, before taking an involuntary step back from the acrid smoke.

'I'm sorry Doctor,' Fitz wailed as he snatched the baking tray from its fiery inferno, 'I tried, I really did.'

The Doctor nonchalantly sauntered over to the smoking tray. 'I do believe Fitz, that fish fingers are meant to be golden and crispy, not -' he held up one of the charred items '-not black and crisp.'

'Take-away again?' Fitz suggested, wiping his grimy hands over his sweat-encrusted forehead, managing to make an even bigger mess of himself. But the Doctor was paying no attention.

'I mean, look,' he continued, 'you can actually draw with this.'

Fitz looked at the Doctor's work of art. 'Fair enough Doctor, but I don't think the landlady will approve of you drawing on the walls.'

The Doctor dropped the fish finger, which shattered on the floor. 'It's all Compassion's fault,' he grumbled. 'If only she hadn't stranded us two, the Doctor and Fitz, in Margate for six months for a spot of male bonding. Luckily however we were able to find a flat and –'

'Whoa just there,' Fitz cut in. 'Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I already know all this.'

'Fitz, Fitz, Fitz, my friend, whom I first met in 1963 whilst travelling with Sam, my previous companion –'

'Doctor!' Fitz exasperatingly screamed. 'You're only doing it again. Stop it! It's irritating.'

The Doctor staggered to a chair 'it's very strange. I've been doing it ever since my old TARDIS was destroyed and Compassion, my other companion became a replacement via Remote technology and the TARDIS telepathic circuits in the realm of Avalon, a world created when –' He caught Fitz's glance. 'I'm doing it again, aren't I? Ah well, at least its good news.'

'How, Doctor?' Fitz asked, sceptically eyeing his friend.

'Well, every time, I do an info-dump like that, we have another exciting adventure, like the time on the –' He was cut short again, this time by a slap.

'Pull yourself together, Doctor, nothing exciting is going to happen. This is Margate,' Fitz yelled, violently shaking the Doctor by the shoulders. Got that? No alien invasions, no mad scientists and certainly no mysterious old men wanting you to go on a dangerous mission. For heavens sake, we've been here for precisely six hours and you've already cracked up. '

'No Fitz, the Pot Noodle hat stops the evil Zygons from reading my thoughts. Don't you see?' the Doctor wildly cried back, 'they've got to you too. All of us…' He sank into a corner and began to gibber.

'For crying out loud…' Fitz shook his head and picked up the phone. 'Chinese?'

'I'm a Time Lord. A Time Lord,' came the Doctor's mad little reply.

'Oooookay then. Whatever you say.' Fitz shook his head. Six months of this? What did the Doctor

think was going to happen? Exciting adventures didn't just turn up on the doorstep.

The doorbell rang.

Did they?

Fitz cautiously opened the door. In the corridor stood an old, withered man, his body hidden from the elements by a magnificent silk cloak. A spindly beard twisted to halfway down his chest. Yep, thought Fitz, definitely the epitome of mysterious.

The old man gazed at Fitz with ancient eyes, and spoke with a voice of old leather. 'I seek the one known as... the Doctor!' he intoned, moving out his hands in a grand gesture.

The Doctor was instantly by Fitz's side, eyes gleaming, full of energy. 'I am here, mysterious old man,' he replied, hastily adjusting his cravat. 'I suppose you wish to send me on a mission of extreme danger and excitement on which the fate of the entire universe rests?'

'As it happens, yes.' The old man shuffled mysteriously into the middle of the room. 'I have lost the Omicron Emerald, a gemstone that has the power to destroy a galaxy!'

At this point, the Doctor was leaping up and down on the spot. 'Oh goody goody goody,' he intoned breathlessly.

'Doctor, there is something you must know,' the stranger began ominously, and then his tone of voice changed. 'Why on earth have you got a Pot Noodle pot on your head?'

'Because I'm the king of the Pot Noodle people,' the Doctor replied reasonably. 'Now, how are we to know what this precious gem looks like?'

'The crystal is encased inside a ring of pure gold,' the old man begun. 'It shines with the light –'

'Like this one here then?' Fitz reached forwards and fingered a medallion that was hung around the old man's neck. The ancient being halted his speech and looked down.

'Oh yeah. Right. That *is* it. Oh. Well, cheers then.' With that, he departed as mysteriously as he had come.

'Bye,' Fitz waved, confused as ever.

As he shut the door, the Doctor angrily rounded on his friend. 'What the hell was that about? That could have been our greatest ever adventure! Instead it was over in under a minute.' He stormed out of the room.

Fitz tutted to himself. 'Ah well, win some, lose some.' He bent down and fished a battered copy of the Radio Times from under a pile of beer cans. 'Hey, Doc. Only Fools and Horses is on tonight,' he called, 'wanna watch?' No reply was forthcoming. 'Doctor?' Fitz called nervously. 'Doctor, what are you doing?'

A mad laugh echoed across from the Doctor's room. 'Come and see Fitz. Come and see.' The Doctor's shadow crept into view, his finger appearing from behind the doorframe, beckoning.

'Whatever you want Doc. But no funny business this time.' Fitz nervously made his way to the Doctor's door, only to find it shut.

'Don't come in don't come in,' came the muffled voice from the other end, along with a multitude of crashes. 'Ready... now!' Fitz opened the door and after seeing the tableaux laid out in front of him, simply shook his head in

pity.

'Zo, ve meet at last, meeester Kreiner,' the Doctor muttered in an unconvincing German accent whilst stroking a cat.

'Please don't mock my German heritage.' Fitz turned round to leave.

'Oh, come on Fitz, you kraut, don't be such a spoil-sport.' The Doctor pulled a face. 'Anyway, I've been training Kitty here for ages.'

'Ages, Doctor?'

'Well, several minutes.'

With a sharp shake of his head, Fitz entered the Doctor's pokey little room and sat on the bed. Strangely enough, it was already beginning to smell of marijuana. 'Go on then Doctor, where did you get... Kitty... from?'

'I bought him'

'Doctor...'

'I did – from a shop!'

'Doctor, you didn't... no, wipe that smile of your face. Where did you get him from?'

'Fitz Fitz Fitz Fitz,' the Doctor muttered, suddenly leaping to his feet and pacing across the room. 'It is my duty to protect the innocent, to free the oppressed, to...'

'Ah,' Fitz leaned back, letting the cat leap into his lap, 'so you stole it.'

This statement was met with a tiny squeak. It sounded like 'bastard.'

'Don't tell me... you broke into an old lady's house and stole her cat?'

'Fitz, you've got it all wrong, it wasn't like that... anyway, she wasn't *that* old.'

Fitz's eyes flicked from the Doctor to a rather suspicious looking stain on the ceiling. 'Dear god...' he whispered, 'he really is a pot noodle freak...'

'And anyway Fitz,' the Doctor continued, oblivious to the sanity going on around him, 'don't you want to know *why*?'

'Doc, I'm afraid knowledge of why you do anything is likely to send me mad.'

'Ha ha Fitz, but seriously. This cat – Kitty – is out new enemy!'

Fitz's eyes boggled at this new twist in the tale

'Yes, I knew you'd be delighted. I've trained it. Watch.' At this, the Doctor fixed the cat currently sitting on Fitz's lap with a stare and intoned 'Kitty – do your evil laugh.'

Kitty stretched and began to suck on Fitz's jumper. 'Devilish, Doctor, but how –'

'Kitty – kill!'

Kitty yawned and fell asleep on Fitz's shoulder. 'Absolutely impressive,' Fitz clapped slowly, 'Doctor, you really have excelled yourself this time.'

The Doctor's face fell. 'Oh you're dead, Kitty, you're going down!' He began to gesticulate wildly. 'Amateurs, I'm trapped with a mangy, useless bag of fur, and a cat!'

'Whoa there, Doc...' Fitz gingerly placed the warm frame of Kitty onto the bed and stood up to face the Doctor. 'I'm sure we can... ouch!' Fitz slapped his neck as a sharp pain shot through it. 'Doctor, are you throwing pins at me again?'

'No...' The Doctor's face brightened as a massive smile broke across it. 'Finally – something to defeat! What do you think, Fitz? I'd say a seven foot tall invisible were-beast with CDs for eyes, twelve feet so it can run fast, a tape player in its stomach so it can record conversations and a spoon attached to its head so if you're made of ice-cream it can eat you. Oh yeah, and it spits pins!'

'Or...' Fitz began, brushing off cat hairs, 'or, back from the planet Wibble, we could be facing fleas.'

'Giant space fleas!' the Doctor screamed, jumping up and down on the spot in great excitement. 'With lasers in their legs and big...'

'I think you'll find that these fleas are your normal bog-standard cat fleas – ouch.' Fitz slapped his neck again. '...And I think you'd better do something about it...'

'I know – I'll talk with them, convince them to...'

'No, Doc, you'll go down to the chemist and buy some flea powder.'

'Aaaaw, but it's dark and cold.'

'But it's heroic,' Fitz replied, bundling the Doctor into his coat. 'Bye!'

'Yes, I suppose it is,' the Doctor intoned, and bravely walked out of the door, stopping only to smash his head against the doorframe.

Out of the wilderness of Margate comes striding a stranger: a man with a silly name, with wavy hair and a cravat. Only one man can unravel the mystery of The Flea; only one man can begin to understand what brand of flea power should be bought; only one man can hope to apply it to the affected area. And only one man knows that he's got precisely 58p in loose change and will have to nick the aforementioned item.

Only one man can stop The Itching!

'Whew!' The Doctor pushed closed the door to the chemists as a deluge of rain came knocking. With a deft motion of his hand, he swept his hair clean, sending splashes of water cascading onto the dissolvable bath salts section. Highlighting his blatant disregard to the policy of find-it-yourself, the

Doctor strode straight up to the girl at the counter.

'Excuse me madam, but where can I find some flea powder.' The Doctor looked sheepish for a while before slamming his fist onto the counter and shouting 'goddamn it!'

'Eh?' The girl stopping in mid chew of a stick of gum to stare at the Doctor before turning away and ignoring him. The Doctor stared coldly at her elephant-pink hair.

'Lady, I need some flea power desperately!'

'Ahh,' she leered back, mouth still working away in an annoying slurping noise. 'I get 'ya, sir.' With that she flung a small packet onto the counter and turned nonchalantly away again.

'What's this?' The Doctor picked up the packet and began to examine it.

'What you asked for sir, condoms.'

'I did not, I asked for flea powder.'

'I get it,' the assistant winked, 'you want the flavoured sort.'

'No – I want flea powder!'

'Flea power, eh?'

'Yes!'

'You want flea powder?'

'Yes!'

'I understand sir.' She thumped another packet onto the counter. Three 12-inch black nobblers. With rings.'

'No, I...' The Doctor quickly swept up the packet and stuffed it into his pocket. 'I am literally after flea powder.'

'Ah, an infection then, sir?'

'No – flea powder!'

'Let me guess, it goes all gungy when you get an er-'

'Whoa, just stop it,' the Doctor clutched his hands to his head melodramatically, face turning red (probably from anger, although it was hard to tell) 'Can you think of anything other than... you know'

'No, sir, I don't know. Please tell me,' the assistant cheekily retorted.

'Just give me some flea powder, okay!'

The girl reluctantly threw a tube of flea powder in the Doctor's general direction. 'That'll be twenty quid, sir'

'Huh, are you blatantly overcharging me in order to screw an extra amount of cash that you can nick and spend on your heroin habit?'

'Yeah.'

'Fair enough.' The Doctor's smile faded as he patted his pockets. 'I'm afraid I haven't got any cash. Would you mind if I paid tomor-'

'Sorry sir, nope.'

'Well, in that case,' with a grin, the Doctor pulled out a gun and waved it in the assistant's face. 'Give me all your money.' He paused as he waggled the gun some more. 'Whoa, this can't be healthy...'

The girl's face paled considerably, and she began to pile money from the till into the Doctor's outstretched hand. 'You can't do this...'

The Doctor stuffed the cash into a back pocket. 'Don't worry, it's not a real gun.'

'Yes it is!'

'No it's not, it's a radiation detector.' In order to prove this; the Doctor playfully pulled the trigger. The assistant's face splattered across the wall. 'Ah well,' the Doctor sighed to himself, 'win some, lose some...'

'FITZ!' Fitz awoke with a start at the Doctor's scream. As the front door slammed, he guiltily switched over from the porn film on Channel 5.

'Good grief Doc, where have you been – it's 1 am!'

The Doctor staggered in, cravat hanging wildly and covered in sick. 'I made a shitload of cash, Fitz,' he screamed, 'but I blew it all on booze and whores.' A semi-naked woman waked sensuously in after him.

'Oookay, Doc, I didn't know you were into that sort of thing.'

'Oh, I'm not,' the Doctor staggered up to Fitz and leaned on his shoulder. Fitz pushed his nose as far away as possible from the alcoholic stench emanating from his friend. 'No Fitz, this lady will be the damsel in distress. I will rescue her!'

'And I will be?' Fitz shakily asked.

'The Master,' idiot, the Doctor shouted in Fitz's ear. Then, to the woman 'he's the Master, okay.'

'That's okay, luvviepie,' she purred, 'I love that kind of thing... master...'

'Right...' Fitz nervously eyed the front door. It was looking very inviting. 'So, what do I need to be the... Master...?'

'Don't you know Fitz, are you STUPID?' The Doctor began to dangerously swing his arms, and staggered sideways into a wall. 'You need a hard black tube with shrinking powers...'

Fitz let out a squeal. 'Doctor, my genital deformities are none of your business.'

He made a brave dash for his room, but was only foiled after the Doctor threw a brick at his head. As Fitz lay on the ground, he heard the Doctor. 'Right... remove his clothes... nah, the Master wears black... oh, I don't know, I'll have to paint him or something... I've got some black emulsion somewhere...'

Just before he passed out, Fitz had a nasty revelation. 'Six... bloody... months...' he gasped, before finally letting his head slam to the floor. Which was lucky really, since he really, *really* didn't want to be awake for what happened to him next...

Cabinet of Changes

by Philip Purser-Hallard
(with thanks to Paul Magrs & Jeremy Hoad)

I

That old television set's a nuisance. It seems to only pick up children's programmes from the sixties. Andy Pandy, Muffin the Mule, Bill and Ben. *All classics, of course. But last night Fitz wanted to watch* NYPD Blue, *and the nearest I could get for him was* Dixon of Dock Green.

I think he misses Compassion more than he lets on.

'It's therapy for him, I reckon,' Fitz confided to Sally as he took her coat. 'He's getting better all the time.'

Sally was non-committal. 'He seems a bit more cheerful since his leg cleared up.' She opened up her dog-basket, trying to calm Canine's excited yaps. Fitz regarded the dog narrowly. He hadn't trusted it an inch since the time he'd got plastered and it talked to him. He still wasn't sure which one of them was to blame for that.

'Well, I think it's a waste of time,' Compassion declared loudly. 'A magic show, indeed. He'll be going on *Stars in their Eyes* next.' She was leaning at a sarcastic angle against the door to the living room. Probably resented the Doctor monopolising the room with the TV in, Fitz thought.

'I wouldn't put it past him,' Sally smirked. 'Canine seems a bit excited, don't you pet? I think he smells something.'

'Ah, that'll be Wesley,' Fitz told her. 'The Doctor's cat. It's OK, she's shut away. He kind of took pity on her and now she lives here.'

'She took advantage of him, if you ask me,' Compassion said tartly. She'd not seen the attraction, even though the poor thing had turned up in the garden clearly starving, little more than a kitten. The Doctor had taken the sodden creature in, dried her with a hairdryer and called her Wesley, for reasons which remained obscure to Fitz. Compassion had been as irritated by the name as by the act of altruism. Why Wesley?, she'd demanded to know as the little animal lapped hungrily at her bowl of bread and milk. Why not Tasha or Deanna, if the Doctor insisted on a *Star Trek* name? Or did he mean Wesley from *Buffy*? They were both as wet as each other, if you asked her. The Doctor had muttered something about great ecclesiastical reformers, and Compassion had rolled her eyes predictably.

Fitz led Sally past Compassion into the darkened living room. The dining chairs were laid out in a neat row, the big bay window curtained off as a makeshift stage. Tall candlesticks gave out minimal light, and also provided some heat against the chilly spring evening. Sally sat down, setting Canine comfortably on her lap. The dog yawned mightily. Fitz gave it a suspicious look.

'In this light he'll be able to get away with anything,' declared Compassion from behind them. Fitz thought for a moment she meant the terrier. 'The less the audience can see, the more the conjuror can do without them noticing.'

'Well, that's all part of the show, I'm sure,' said Sally, realising from Fitz's manic gestures that the Doctor was already onstage, and listening behind the curtain. 'I'm looking forward to it.' The doorbell rang, and Fitz scampered off into the hall.

He knew Compassion and their other guest did not get on. She'd probably send her away, given half the chance.

Iris was standing outside the door, wrapped up in her usual multiple cardigans and brandishing a half-full bottle of Gordon's. 'Fitz, darling!' she cried out enthusiastically. 'Come and help Auntie Iris up the steps, there's a good lad.' She was distinctly wobbly on her pins, Fitz realised. He could see her bus parked right outside, and tried hard not to think of what she'd be like driving. Compassion gave a tiny sniff as Fitz hurried down the steps.

'What's he called us here for this time then?' Iris wondered, leaning heavily on Fitz, and incidentally breathing gin into his face. 'Another dinner party for his friends?'

'He's giving us a magic show,' Fitz told her as they negotiated the hall. 'It seems to be his latest craze.'

'I spent a while as a magician's assistant when I was a gal,' said Iris, much interested. 'The saucy sod kept pulling rabbits out of my cleavage.'

'Did he saw you in half?' wondered Compassion.

'I wouldn't let him,' Iris snapped at her. 'There are limits.' She shouldered her way past her into the dark room, eager to tap on the fishtank and annoy the Doctor's angel fish.

It turned out that the Doctor had rigged up a big arc lamp, to spotlight him on stage. He wore his usual old-fashioned clothes, which looked magicianly enough to Fitz now he could see them in the appropriate context. The shiny top hat was a new addition, though. Fitz was sure he could hear it rustling.

The Doctor stood between a little baize card table and his magic cabinet, his pride and joy these last few weeks. Big gold letters proclaimed it the **CABINET OF CHANGES**. Just large enough to hold a full-sized person, its dark surface spangled with glittering stars, it was tall and strangely solid, as if it wasn't made of plywood but of some altogether heavier, more definite material. Fitz hadn't a clue where he'd got it. He'd just found it standing in the living room one day, opposite the fishtank and vivarium, with the Doctor touching up the paintwork as if he'd owned it all his life.

'Ah, we're all here then,' the Doctor said, beaming. 'Then we'll begin.'

I never have found out what's inside. Not really *inside.*

I mean, it has a false back. It surely must do. How else could it conjure up such promiscuous miscellanies? I close the doors with my magician's flourish on the empty interior, bright black beetle-shell paint covering shabby woodwork, and a moment later it opens on all manner of shiny things. Brass candlesticks and carriage-clocks and mittens. Old opera-glasses, crystal decanters and dusty gramophone records. Great piles of seashells, glistening pink and white. The little pump engine from a Hornby train set. Huge vases of orchids and lilies.

Who puts them there? I can't imagine. I know the cabinet's false back must lead to a monstrous treasure-cave; a trove Aladdin or Batman would find scandalous.

Maybe it gives onto the old magician's shop itself, where I found it that April day, that first long walk after the pain in my leg cleared up.

It smelled of incense, that shop. Patchouli, I think - I prefer sandalwood myself. Not that I often burn the stuff these days. Bit of an antisocial habit, but as a friend once told me, I'm just an old hippie at heart. And in the shop it offset the smell of dust and cobwebs, which seemed entirely reasonable.

The place was full of treasures, a secret hoard of delight and discovery, a relentless cornucopia of finds. **Ye Magick Shoppe** *it said above the window, in big mock-Gothic letters, and the inside lived up to the promise. Inside were shelves and shelves of coins and balls and cards and caskets and cups and mirrors. Tarot decks and crystal balls, candles and swords and huge silk handkerchiefs, all colours. Cages full of doves and rabbits and mice, all white as driven snow. Phrenology heads rubbed cheeks with musty skulls. A wardrobe rail of magician's costumes through the ages - dark blue robes adorned with silver sigils, silk pyjamas, pointy slippers, tuxedoes with white bow ties and ruffled shirts. Fezzes, berettas, top hats, even tall steepled things with starry sequins. Wands and staffs and rods in all sizes, with inscriptions in alphabets I'd never seen. I was in heaven.*

The owner was a slim, tall man, a redhead - like Compassion but more fiery. His face was scholarly and lined - but strangely young, as if a weight of future ages still hung upon him. His rolled-up shirtsleeves revealed bracelets jangling all down one arm, some kind of dragon tattoo writhing up the other. A smart brocade waistcoat looked odd with his crumpled tweed trousers and rumpled socks. A moth-eaten coat hung on the chair behind him.

- Good afternoon, my friend, he was saying affably, startling green eyes looking up from the red leather book he was perusing. That incense smell got stronger as I approached him. - And it is, indeed, a good afternoon. Might I ask if you're just here to browse, or is there something particular with which I can help you?

Just then I saw. Behind him was the cabinet.

It stood a tallish person's height, dark blue and silver, an obstinately rectangular night sky of bright gold stars. I could have climbed inside immediately, so strong was its fascination for me. The doors were closed, the words **CABINET OF CHANGES** *blazoned across them in golden letters.*

- Could I have a look at that? I asked him.

- Ah, yes, the owner said calmly behind me. - It's a fine piece, the transmutation cabinet. Very versatile.

Moving closer, I saw the huge iron key in one door, the tiny face-high hatch in the other through which someone could look out, the narrow slits for pushing swords into a volunteer victim. The cabinet called to something old in me - childhood memories of the Narnia *books, perhaps, a secret wardrobe full of fur and mothballs, leading to an enchanted frosty wood. Or the wooden chests in Mother's sinister nursery stories, where mermaids' husbands keep their seal-skins to stop them fleeing back into the ocean.*

- I'll take it, I told him. I knew I couldn't really afford it. I can be pretty impulsive when something takes my fancy that way.

His tone was doubtful.

- The cabinet can be a little… risky, or perhaps I should say unpredictable, in the hands of a dabbler. He gave me a long, appraising look. - But I apologise. I can see you are a professional, my friend. He took a deep breath. -□Twenty pounds.

It was worth far more than that, I could tell, but he would take no argument. Twenty pounds was all he'd take, or there would be no sale. I knew it was already mine - the paying for it was just a little ritual we had to go through before we could be together, my bold blue cabinet and I.

I had to use his phone to call a taxi. It came to collect me and my splendid new acquisition, and bring us home.

Before we could get it into the car, I had to take out two cigar-store Indians, a half-length wooden mirror and a bookcase full of shoes.

The Doctor spent a moment gazing in admiration at his magic cabinet, then turned to his audience. Clearing his throat with a magician's hauteur, he began. 'Allow me to introduce myself□-'

'We all know you, Doctor,' put in Iris.

'I,' the Doctor proclaimed, determinedly, 'am that mysterious practitioner of the esoteric arts known only as the Doctor. And this -' he gestured expansively, in case they had trouble distinguishing which item of furniture he might be referring to - 'is my magic cabinet.'

'Hello, Doctor,' Iris parroted. 'Cooee, cabinet.'

'Shut up,' Compassion urged her fiercely. 'Doctor, get on with it.' Now it actually came down to it, she seemed strangely eager to be entertained. The Doctor pouted for a moment, then began the show.

It wasn't exactly world class, but Fitz found himself impressed by the Doctor's patter. Say what you liked about him, he certainly had the gift of the gab. The gift of skill at conjuring tricks was another matter, though. The card tricks went reasonably well, although it was difficult to overlook the fact that the 'pack' of cards he was using was so old, battered and heterogeneous (some of them even had naked women on the back, Fitz noted with interest) that they could be told apart at a distance of twenty paces. The disappearing tricks were less successful, unless you looked on them as things-vanishing-up-sleeves tricks, in which case they just about worked. The cup-and-ball trick performed with clear plastic beakers was, Fitz thought, almost definitely best forgotten.

Still, the audience were moderately enthusiastic - even the giant lizard in the vivarium seemed interested. Sally was watching with determined appreciation, and Iris was clearly enjoying the show as comedy, laughing uproariously when things went wrong, despite some filthy looks from the Doctor. Compassion was scowling with a fierce concentration which Fitz found mildly unsettling. Only Canine had decided to go to sleep.

When the Doctor called for a volunteer, Fitz realised he ought to show a bit of support, although if he was honest what he wanted to be expressing was embarrassment and dread. He was surprised when Compassion immediately stood up.

'The lady in the camouflage trousers, yes you madam, come on down!' the Doctor called from around five feet in front of her. She complied.

'You sure you want to do this?' Fitz hissed at her as she stood up, but she ignored him.

'Now, Comp- now, madam. Would you care to examine this television set?' the Doctor suggested, indicating it with a melodramatic finger.

Compassion glanced at it. It was of battered black plastic, with a metal stand. 'I've seen it before. It's a perfectly ordinary TV. Except the teletext is broken.'

'A perfectly ordinary TV, *exactly*,' cried the Doctor triumphantly. 'And would you care to examine this perfectly *extraordinary* magical cabinet of metamorphosis and transmutation?' Compassion did so. She walked all the way around, staring sceptically at its every inch of paintwork. The Doctor hrr'mphed impatiently a couple of times, but she obstinately refused to be hurried.

'The outside seems normal enough,' she finally acknowledged suspiciously. 'What about the inside?'

'Ah ah, patience, Compassion, I mean madam,' declared the Doctor. 'We'll come to that.

'Observe carefully, madam, as I place this perfectly ordinary television set (Goodness, that's heavy, do you think you could give me a hand? Thanks) - Observe carefully as you help me place this perfectly ordinary television set *inside* the cabinet of transformation. Thank you - ah, Fitz, could you come and open the doors, do you think? That's it, just turn the key and clear away anything you find in there. No, I've no idea what it is - some kind of stuffed fish? Never mind. Now, Compassion, if we could put it down just *here* - thank you so very much.'

They both stood back and regarded the TV for a few seconds, defying it to move from its place inside the cabinet. Fitz rather awkwardly returned to his seat, leaving what appeared to be a stuffed and mounted mer-parrot on the Doctor's card table.

'Now, madam,' said the Doctor once again. 'Observe as I lock the doors to the cabinet, like this - ' he did so, with a further flourish - 'Then let's retire to a safe distance while I say the magic words.'

Compassion seemed entirely caught up in the act by now, obeying without a moment's hesitation. The Doctor pointed his fingers at the cabinet with an arcane gesture and let out in one long breath a string of occult syllables. Fitz thought they included a couple of makes of car.

The cabinet sat unchanged in front of them, entirely failing to emit dramatic flashes or puffs of smoke.

The Doctor held up his hand for silence. His hat rustled loudly, and shifted slightly on his head. Iris giggled. 'Perhaps you'd care to open up the doors, madam?' he suggested to Compassion with great dignity, handing her the key. 'Careful now.'

As the doors opened, it took the five of them a moment to register that the TV set had, in fact,

vanished, to be replaced by a chamber pot full of dried pampas grass. There was a numb silence for a moment, then Fitz joined in a resounding round of applause.

'Thank you, thank you,' beamed the Doctor modestly, looking quite relieved. He bowed and doffed his hat in acknowledgement, sending two angry doves speeding in a wide arc across the room. Recovering, one settled on the fishtank, while the other circled the light fitting. Iris cackled like a mad thing as it crapped on Fitz's shoulder. The Doctor stared defiantly at the ceiling until the disturbance had died down.

'Now, madam, if you'd care to examine the *inside* of the cabinet, as we agreed?' Compassion gave him a look. 'You'll see that there are no false bottoms, no trapdoors, no mirrors, indeed no trickery of any kind.'

Kicking the commode out of the way, Compassion stepped inside, and stared intently around her. 'There must be something.'

'Why must there?' the Doctor bridled. 'Are you questioning the alchemical skill of the legendary Doctor? The walls and ceiling are a bit too thin to fit a whole TV, I think you'll find.'

Compassion was adamant. 'Television sets don't just vanish.' She got down on her hands and knees, and started tapping the floor suspiciously.

'Oh, come on, Compassion, there's no trapdoor in the living room floor!' the Doctor exploded, dropping out of character. 'Face it, it's magic!'

Compassion looked him in the eye. 'There's no such thing.'

The Doctor glared back. 'Then perhaps you'd care to stay inside the cabinet while I bring the television back?'

'I wouldn't see anything. It's dark in there,' Compassion pointed out sensibly.

'I've got a torch!' exclaimed Sally suddenly. She ferreted around in her handbag. 'In case of sudden blackouts or breakdowns in the middle of nowhere.' She pulled out a pencil torch, which she flicked on immediately. A strong beam lanced out across the room, waking Canine who yelped in surprise.

'If you could pass it over then, please, second madam? Many thanks. Now, Com- now, madam, take the torch, and remain in the cabinet, if you please.' Compassion seemed all too keen, Fitz thought. He realised why she'd been so intent on the magic show - she'd been waiting for a trick to go right all this time, so she could then work out how it had been done. Not that she wanted to spoil it for the rest of them, she just had a yearning to reduce things to the explicable. She must have found the show so far a bit of a let-down.

He thought he'd also detected a selfish panic in her eyes at the disappearance of the TV.

The Doctor, impatient to prove his point, was already closing the doors on her. 'With our sceptical young volunteer now in place,' he was intoning, 'we must reverse the words of magic which caused the vanishment to occur. If I can remember what they were, that is,' he added, concern creasing his face for just a moment.

Iris leant over to hiss to Fitz. 'That's a pretty good trick, you know. All done with a rotating floor thingamajig, I expect. It's daft to leave that girl in there with a torch, though. She'll soon spot what's going on.'

The Doctor let fly a second string of syllables, indistinguishable by Fitz from the first (although now he was listening more closely, he'd a feeling he heard a rude word in there somewhere). As before, the cabinet reacted with stolid indifference.

The Doctor tapped on the cabinet's doors. 'Are you all right in there, Compassion?' he called. There was silence. 'She'll be dumbstruck by the inexplicability of the reappearance, I expect,' he stated confidently. 'Compassion? Are you all right?' He turned back to the audience. 'Ah, well, let's see, shall we?'

He slid open the viewing panel in the left hand door, and peered inside. His face registered mild panic.

Turning they key once more, he threw open the doors explosively, then turned towards the room for a triumphant bow. Then suddenly whirled back to face the cabinet.

Inside sat an ancient bakelite television set, far older than the one they'd put inside, with a knob for changing channels and a tiny mirrored screen. On top of it stood a three-foot plaster Virgin Mary.

Of Compassion there was absolutely no sign.

That old TV set's been a pain in the neck from day one. But of course it's the only one we've got now. Whoops.

I'm more concerned about poor Compassion, though. I suppose she must be still there in the cabinet - wherever all the things I find there come from. I can't imagine how they fit - the junk it's thrown at me has already overflowed the attic, and started filling up Compassion's floor as well. It's stacked up to the ceiling in huge toppling piles, great towers of lumber and mirror and brass. It's not safe to go in there any more.

I think the box did it deliberately. It saw me taking all the credit for the television's miraculous disappearance, and decided to teach me a lesson. Selfish thing.

At least Compassion's got our actual TV set in there with her. She won't want for entertainment.

When she vanished, we searched the living room thoroughly, and then the house. When we realised she was really gone - and I'd convinced the others I had no idea how to get her back - Iris took charge. She can be an annoying old fusspot, but she's handy in a crisis.

- You stupid old fool, she said to me (and with fairly good reason, although I did resent her calling me old). - What on earth did you think you were doing, putting someone into a working *magic cabinet? Who knows what might have happened to her in there!*

Oh, she was cross.

- I'm sorry, I said, humbly. I was really quite shaken by the whole thing.

- I should think so too! Now, what were the words you used?

But the words no longer worked. Which isn't surprising, since I now know it was the cabinet working the trick, not me. Closing and reopening the doors yielded up a collection of gaudy Russian dolls, a rubber swordfish and a great big gong, but that was about it. However many times we intoned the words, made the gestures or just shouted at the cabinet to bring her back, it obstinately churned out random junk instead.

Eventually we gave up and drifted off. Iris filched a bottle of vodka from the kitchen and stormed off in her bus, still ranting about irresponsible meddling and the consequences of your actions. Sally gave me a comforting peck on the cheek, packed her dog up in his basket and went home.

Fitz plugged in the old bakelite telly and started watching The Black and White Minstrel Show. *- I can't believe they're repeating this, he kept muttering to himself.*

I took off my top hat and fed my fish, then tried to get my doves down from the furniture.

And all the time the cabinet was sitting there in the corner. I didn't feel it was watching me or anything silly like that. It didn't need to. It was just there, purposeful and patient, with an agenda I knew nothing about. Obstinate blue oblong that it was, full of stars like that sinister Monolith from 2001, *it had transported Compassion to who knows where, and might be doing who knows what to her inside itself. I've known it was aware from our first meeting - when I first saw it, I'd say, if meeting wasn't exactly how it had felt. I'd been so eager to get it home and test its magic properties. Now I was afraid. It has a power nobody warned me about.*

What if I open it one day, in mid-conjuration or to give it a bit of a dust inside, and instead of random furniture I find somebody standing there? Someone who once vanished inside? One of those so-called Glass Men of Valcea, or the other hideous creatures in my dreams? Or just someone who seems-human-but-who-knows? Perhaps even a person the cabinet has put together itself, to do its bidding?

II

Romy was a friend of the Doctor's Fitz hadn't met before. He'd heard the Doctor talk about her, of course - she was one of his oldest friends, and Fitz rather suspected they'd been a little more than that in their time - but it seemed they didn't see a lot of each other these days. She'd joined a church of some kind, with peculiar modern views Fitz gathered, and seemed to have become something rather high up in it, locally at least. She was very busy with the needs of her congregation, the Doctor said, and didn't have a lot of time for social visits.

He had particularly asked her to be here tonight, though. Fitz wasn't sure why. The Doctor hadn't been keen on seeing Sally or Iris since the business with - well, since Compassion went missing. (They'd never talked about it, but they were keeping her part of the house free for her, or as free as the enormous piles of tacky ornaments would allow.) Which meant that for tonight it was just Fitz, the Doctor and Romy. Fitz wasn't certain how he felt about that, but he was careful to be cordial enough when Romy arrived.

She was a tremendously upright person, Fitz realised, not even a hint of bending in her carriage. As a general slouchabout himself, he found that a little intimidating. Her features were still beautiful, despite her middle age - when she was younger, she must have been an absolute stunner. Lucky old Doctor. She was wearing a plain black cassock and dog collar, although from what Fitz heard he was doubtful she was strictly entitled to them. Her shoulder-length greying-blond hair was in a sensible bob, and her manner was frighteningly, schoolmistressly sensible.

'You must be Fitz,' she noted. 'The Doctor's told me about you.' Her voice suggested that she was carefully reserving judgement. Fitz tried surreptitiously to hold himself up straighter.

'Er, I think he's getting ready,' he told her, trying not to sound defensive. 'Do you want to come through to the living room? Can I get you a drink or anything?'

Romy gave him a cool, appraising look, then smiled. Fitz relaxed slightly, feeling as if someone had turned his body temperature up several degrees. 'Perhaps, Fitz,' Romy said conspiratorially, 'you can tell me what all this is about? The Doctor phoned me this morning and told me it was terribly urgent I come over tonight. You know what he's like when he gets an idea into his head. I had to postpone an elders' meeting. I'd like to say I won't lose any sleep over it, but in the purely literal sense that's probably not true. I had no *idea* how dull they could be.' She paused. She was trying to put him at his ease, Fitz could tell, but she still wanted answers.

'Er,' said Fitz. 'I think, well, you know what he's like. The fact is,' he said, 'I think he wants to put on a magic show for us.'

The look she gave him made him hope earnestly she never came visiting when he was sick.

The cabinet gave me a gift this morning. That's how I know it's forgiven me at last.

I've got into the habit of opening it first thing when I get up. I've no real hope that Compassion will reappear overnight, but I'd never forgive myself if I didn't check. I've given up taking out the junk it produces, though - it's filled all the available rooms, and if I leave it in there, I find it's turned into something else next time I take a look.

This morning, though, it gave me something beautiful. I opened it up and there it was, the size of a person, filling the cabinet's interior with gorgeous prismatic colour. With Fitz's reluctant help I lifted it out, and we staggered with it up into the attic. There I cleared a space around the skylight, so the sun could shine right through it.

It's a stained-glass window, deepest blue like the cabinet itself. Etched in vibrant colours, crimson and flame-yellow and copper-green, it depicts a life-sized figure, with many faces like a Hindu god. This glass man wears an azure suit of armour, holds a sword and shield like some crusading knight, and in the centre of his chest are laid out two scarlet hearts, vital and glowing as if the artist has trapped their double rhythm inside the glass itself. His faces are all different - some I think I recognise, including my own, some are strangers to me. Instead of a cross, the shield bears a point d'interrogation *gules upon a field argent. So my heraldic dictionary tells me.*

As I look closer, though, I see that the figure is made up of smaller images, tiny pictures complete in themselves, all merging to form the figure of the great glass knight. Scrabbling around, my hand finds a magnifying glass in one of the tea-chests. Peering at these little pictures, I see that they, too, are made up from smaller scenes, intricately etched with detail vanishing into the infinitesimal. From a distance the colours merge to form the bold colours of the figure and his background, but up close there are deep oranges and browns, rich purples and greens, harmoniously blending into his armoured body like tattoos.

Staring enthralled at the tiny images, I see a

woman in white silk with a flower necklace and corn-gold hair

bone-brittle dinosaur glowering and snapping from a dark earth wall

mansion-house straddled by a jack-i'-th'-green plant-giant

buttery clock softening and melting dripping time down the wall

bright globe with verdant countries smiling against a landscaped sky

shiny fool's-gold handbag with an angry Disney scowl

bloated sun raining fire on a new desert of burning metal

man of scraps and fragments his arm a crab's claw his head a fish-bowl

flaming tiger crouched to spring in snowy woodland

million tiny images made of sharp and glittering contours; shards and fragments and splinters of bright glass joining in magnificent sapphire splendour to create the virtuous, vitreous figure of the many-headed knight in his magnificent armour.

Fitz felt he'd probably reached his limit when the Doctor asked him to hand over his mobile phone.

'You're going to smash it with a hammer, aren't you?' he stated bluntly.

The Doctor grinned. 'Come on, Fitz - that is, come on, member of the audience who I haven't previously met. Have a little faith.'

Fitz glanced in mute appeal at Romy, the other half of the Doctor's select audience, but she returned his gaze serenely. She'd shown surprising patience with the Doctor, presumably reasoning that if he'd lost his marbles it was best to go along with it until they could both wrestle him to the ground and tie him up.

He supposed she was right. Whatever had produced the Doctor's sudden defiant urge for a repeat performance, it wasn't amenable to argument, as he'd discovered at considerable length that lunchtime. Which meant the two of them had to go along with the magic show for the moment, unless it looked like anyone was actually going to get hurt. Meekly, he handed over the phone, trying to work out when he might afford another.

The Doctor wrapped the mobile in a purple silk cloth, and placed it with a flourish into a paper bag. He seemed serenely unaware that the bag had 'Boots the Chemist plc' printed on it in large letters.

'A hammer would be a crude implement for such a skilled esoteric professional as I,' the Doctor intoned. 'I prefer to use - a walking boot!'

'Oh, Christ,' said Fitz.

The Doctor produced a leather boot from under the table, and brought it crashing down onto the paper bag, grinning like a maniac all the time. The bag's contents gave a forlorn bleep, then fell silent as the Doctor pounded them to pieces.

'Brilliant,' Fitz told him. 'What next, you magic the cost of a new one out of thin air?'

'Watch,' commanded the Doctor, 'and learn.' Crossing to the so-called magic cabinet, he threw open the double doors as if expecting a fanfare. Inside, lying on a raffia mat atop a folded deckchair, was a second Boots bag.

'Behold!' the Doctor cried.

'What's that,' Fitz asked in exasperation, 'one you prepared earlier?'

'Now,' the Doctor said, excitement ringing through his voice. 'Perhaps, sir, you'd care to look inside that bag?'

Fitz did so. It contained a second silk cloth of the same colour, inside which was a second mobile phone, also in tiny pieces.

'Is that your portable telephone, sir?' the Doctor asked.

'No,' Fitz said. 'That's my portable bloody telephone,' he pointed out, indicating the bag still lying on the card table. 'This,' he explained, 'is some other poor bastard's which you've also smashed up.'

'Oh, no!' the Doctor was put out. 'No no, ignore that first one.' He threw the first bag into the cabinet, slamming the doors closed hurriedly. 'Take my word for it, that is your mobile phone.'

'No, Doctor, it isn't.'

'Yes it is,' the Doctor insisted. 'Look, it's all in bits where I smashed it with the boot!'

'Well, thank you so much.'

'I should think so, too. Now, lady and gentleman - sit down, Fitz, that's your bit over with, thank you - now, lady and gentleman: behold this magic cabinet of transmogrification. Behold this television set.'

As he sat down Fitz gave a tiny groan of terror. He hadn't had time to tell Romy what had happened at the Doctor's last performance. He supposed, if the Doctor tried to make her get into the cabinet, he could shout a warning, bash the Doctor over the head, and then the two of them could make a run for it. She might even be grateful to him for saving her life. There was something to be said for an attractive mature woman, after all, and she might well feel that a younger man –

Shit. You're losing it, Fitz. She's a vicar, for Christ's sake.

The Doctor had apparently decided not to request a helpless female volunteer on this occasion. Instead he was removing from the cabinet the deck chair, the raffia mat and, seemingly, a working model lighthouse made from shells. He produced a dusty porter's trolley from somewhere - it was probably one of the offerings the cabinet itself had left him over the last few weeks - and was using it to heft the ancient black and white television set inside.

Deciding that the trick was probably safe so long as no human beings were directly involved, Fitz subsided nervously.

'Behold,' the Doctor continued at length, slightly out of breath, 'this perfectly ordinary, if rather archaic, television set inside the cabinet of transmutation. Now, the cabinet is an artefact of rare power and magickal energy, whereas I,' he coughed nervously, 'am merely a humble dabbler in the backwaters of the conjuror's art. For this reason, I offer up this anomalous antique television to the cabinet, in exchange for any favours it may deign to grant me.'

That was surely laying on the arcane patter a bit thick, thought Fitz. And besides, if he'd understood the Doctor's meaning correctly they might soon end up with no TV at all. He cleared his throat in protest, but the Doctor was in no mood to brook disagreement.

'I close the doors of the cabinet *like this*, lock them securely with this iron key, then leave the cabinet to work its enchantments.' The Doctor looked round nervously, as if for something to do, and then his

gaze lighted on his audience. 'Can I get you two a cup of tea while we wait?' he suggested.

'I'll do it,' said Fitz quickly, and left the room. He couldn't stand the tension any more. Let Romy talk some sense into him, or let him bundle her off into the cabinet. He really didn't care any more.

It took him perhaps ten minutes to fill the kettle, greet Wesley the kitten, warm the pot, find the teabags, pour out some milk in the special jug the Doctor liked to use when there were guests, pour more milk into the special saucer Wesley liked to use when there was milk, and set out three matching mugs onto the silver tea-tray. By that time, he hoped, things might have calmed down a bit.

When he got back to the living room, he found Compassion chatting amiably to the Doctor and Romy.

That he'd been vaguely prepared for. It was the only thing that made sense of the Doctor's behaviour all day, after all. What he hadn't expected was for her to rush over and give him a huge hug.

Compassion still won't say what happened to her during her time inside the cabinet, and perhaps it's just as well. Either she either can't remember herself, or else she knows it's better for us - for Fitz and me - not to know.

She's a caring kid at heart, I've always said so. I must say that side of her's been to the fore since she came out of the cabinet. Being shut inside can do that sort of thing to you. Enforced isolation, perhaps (but maybe she met others in there?) *Confined spaces* (or are they?) *Sensory deprivation, even* (or is the interior of the cabinet every bit as marvellous and dazzling as the stained glass window it created for me?) *Bound to have an effect.*

I don't know if she's told any of this to Romy. Those two have been thick as thieves since it happened.

They'd never met before - Romy comes from a very long-ago time in my life, and unlike Sally these days I hardly see her from one year to the next. Compassion is a relatively new companion in the house. The first time they saw each other was when I unlocked the cabinet that evening and Compassion fell into my ready arms. I admit I wobbled a little bit - she's a big girl. She was surprisingly affectionate and clingy, like a haughty cat who's let out after shutting herself in a cupboard all day. It must have been traumatic for her, as I say, although I do *wish I had more idea of how. When she hugged Fitz he dropped the tea things everywhere. He was so sorry and shocked, he forgave me for smashing his phone. Well, agreed to let me pay him back in instalments.*

Anyway. It was after that, when we'd all sat down with a nice fresh pot and explained to Romy what was going on, that I realised how cagey Compassion was being. Every time I asked about the inside of the cabinet, she deflected it by asking how we'd been while she'd been away.

Time was she'd just have told me to mind my own business. But we were seeing a new side to her - sensitive, tactful even - and she was keen not to upset me. Maybe she realised how guilty I felt about sending her in there in the first place. Soon she and Romy were talking cheerfully to each other over their tea, sharing the odd joke. It takes a perceptive person to see through Romy's aloof demeanour, and although she'd hate me to say so she doesn't make friends easily. I was glad she and Compassion were hitting it off.

But then Compassion's been far more mellow since it all happened. I'm sure Fitz found her much easier to live with over those next few weeks. She washed up without being asked, did her share of the cleaning and shopping, even cooked us a couple of really remarkable meals. Even little Wesley became very fond of her. Once Fitz had stopped trying to keep the two of them apart, she often came to rub against her legs and have her chin scratched. The cat, that is.

Romy came to visit often during that time, more than she had for years - but it was Compassion, not me, who she came to see. I could have felt a little put out about that, but I thought perhaps Compassion had found she could confide in Romy. I've noticed her clerical manner will do that sometimes. They spent a lot of time together, out in the tiny garden, or up in Compassion's room. When we'd managed

to get it cleared, that is, so she could live there properly again. I was glad Romy was taking Compassion out of herself a little. I'd hoped the original television might have come back with her, but obviously not, and she was at a bit of a loose end without it.

Then one day, out of the blue, she announced that she was moving out. Moving out of my house, and moving in with Romy.

It's difficult to know quite what to say to that. Of course I'm delighted for the pair of them, and said so. Fitz was more surprised than I was - he's very old-fashioned in some ways. He said something mind-bendingly inappropriate about 'chick on chick action', then looked desperately embarrassed. Compassion scowled - she can still scowl like a champion when she wants to - and though I could tell Romy was trying not to giggle, I think Fitz thought she was about to call the police.

I'm enormously happy for them, I really am. They're lovely people and they've both had their share of tragedy. Compassion's an orphan - like Fitz, except she never even knew her parents - and Romy's been through some traumatic times since we went our separate ways. They both deserve a little happiness in life.

I just can't help wondering if it's all thanks to my magic cabinet. I'm sure they'd never have been each other's type before, you see. I'd die rather than say it to either of them, but they were too alike. Aloof, haughty, distant - each with hidden depths to be sure, but would they ever have discovered them if the cabinet hadn't turned Compassion inside out like that? The magic worlds the cabinet led her into were the unexpected vistas of her own heart - and now those depths are on the outside, what else might there be to discover inside her, I wonder?

What might Romy have seen in her, before? What does she find there now? Is the cabinet responsible for all this? Am I responsible?

III

I think it may be time to see my private doctor again. Instead, though, I went this morning to the old magic shop.

Ye Magick Shoppe *was just as before. But this time I saw a painful visual jangle of richness and colour, the tawdry and the terrible mixed up and spat out into a riotous jumble of misplaced symbolism, pagan and appalling. That incense smell, the cobwebs on the ceiling, the costumes and the props were all the same - only the cabinet had gone. And he still sat there, in the same spot, a spider in an ancient web that caught and held passing ideas and made them real, signified becoming signifier before his bright green, young-old eyes.*

- Good day to you, sir, he told me. - And a good day once again it is, I'm sure. Can I help you?

I had the strangest feeling that the things he said hid something else behind them, vitally important but entirely unsaid. But I was in no mood for riddles.

- What's inside the cabinet? I demanded.

- The transmutation cabinet? Ah, yes. A fine piece, that one. I've had her longer than I can remember.

His bright eyes took and held mine, and I realised where I recognised them from. His face was one of those belonging to my many-visaged knight of shining glass.

- Have you ever been inside it? I repeated.

- Once, he said. - Have you?

- A young friend of mine did. She was gone a month. We've no idea what happened to her in there.

- Ah.

I was infuriated by his evasiveness.

- What is it? I fairly bellowed at him. - Is it a miracle, or a curse? Is it alive? Where does the furniture come from? Where do the people go? Does it open on to Heaven, or Hell, or, or - or Faerieland? What did it do to my friend? What's it doing to me*?*

(As I said, it might be time to go and see my doctor.)

- I've no idea, said the owner steadily.

We paused - him calm, me simply out of breath.

- I stocked this shop from that cabinet, he told me ruminatively. - It took me years, and I had to throw away an awful lot of rubbish, but the stock I've got will last me the rest of my life here.

- And once... you went inside? I whispered.

- I did, he said. - I went in, and I stayed there seven days. Then I came out again. I've never been the same since, nor will your young friend ever be. Nor will you, if you will take what it offers you.

I remembered to breathe. There was a very long pause.

- I wonder if you would please do something for me? I asked the magic shop owner humbly.

It was when he welcomed the fourteenth guest of the evening into the Doctor's hall that it suddenly occurred to Fitz to wonder how come he always got reception duty.

As it happened, the fourteenth guest was Sally, and she had a ready answer for him. 'He hates hellos,' she explained bizarrely. 'They remind him of goodbyes. I think he likes to believe all his friends live with him in his giant house and he just runs into them occasionally.' She started to help the fifteenth guest out of his dog-basket. Fitz looked at Canine narrowly, and hoped Wesley had had the sense to clear off for the evening. She was getting quite independent now, and the Doctor had joined forces with their new house-guest, Anji, to fit her a smart new catflap in the kitchen door.

Fitz showed Sally through. This looked like being the Doctor's grandest do yet. The curtains were already open, and the magical paraphernalia laid out. The cabinet and the card table had been surrounded by an extra ring of the tall candlesticks. The cabinet's doors were spread wide open, the box resplendently empty, freshly touched-up black paint glittering proudly as it faced the audience.

The living room was already filled near bursting with the Doctor's audience. Compassion smiled at them from where she sat, while Romy favoured Fitz with a solemn wink. Anji was by the angel fish, pouring out wine for everybody; the Doctor's friend Benny, who worked at the Museum and whom Fitz had fancied the pants off for a couple of months, was helping eagerly. She set down an empty bottle on top of the vivarium, and the huge lizard snapped up at it in anger. Fitz recognised only a handful of the other guests, and before tonight had known none of them to speak to. A man the Doctor's age, moustached and dressed in a smart blazer; a young couple with a baby from Romy's church; the muscular young neighbourhood policeman, who was wearing an earring now he wasn't on duty. Fitz

was amused to note that the rest were pretty women of various ages.

Fitz tried to settle Sally among the rest of them, but she was nervous. Understandable enough after the last time, though she was evidently relieved to see Compassion alive and well. At length, she asked him to mind Canine while she went to the loo. Fitz took the terrier back out into the hall, and watched through the front door as Iris' bus drew up across the street.

'There are an awful lot of people here tonight, aren't there?' observed the dog at his feet.

'Bloody are as well,' agreed Fitz absently.

Iris was carrying something out of her bus, an old-fashioned wheelchair by the looks of things. The old girl's stronger than she looks, Fitz realised, as she climbed back up the step. Was she the last of them, he wondered? He made that sixteen - that was everybody, surely? He couldn't remember who exactly the total included - not the Doctor, obviously, but him and Anji? Had the baby counted? And did Canine count as a person, or –

Fitz looked down at the terrier with a sudden jolt. 'Christ, you're talking again!' he hissed. 'And this time I'm not even pissed!'

'Language,' said Canine primly.

A passer-by in a coat that looked like half a dead camel had stopped to help Iris. Fitz realised they were carrying a passenger out of the bus, an old woman whom they set down in the bath chair. There was something strangely sinuous about her legs. As Iris fussed about her, the newcomer looked over towards Fitz. Even in the sodium street light, the brightness of his fierce red hair was striking.

'I've known the Doctor longer than you,' said Canine. 'I think he's planning something.' He scratched an ear violently with one back paw. 'Ooh, that's better. Hey, can I smell a cat round here somewhere?'

Suddenly, the Doctor was next to Fitz, far too excited to notice trivialities like a dog talking. 'Come on, Fitz,' he insisted, 'come and help her in! These are the last three!' He bounded down the steps and across the road. Fitz and Canine followed apathetically.

The Doctor was making a bee-line for the old woman in the wheelchair, whom the flame-haired stranger was pushing along as if he'd known her all his life. 'Mother!' the Doctor cried out. Fitz stopped dead.

'Jonny!' the old woman called back, legs twitching strangely underneath their blanket. Her vowels were distinctly continental.

'His name is *Jonny*?' Fitz whispered, aghast. Then, 'He has a *mother*?' He massaged his brow wearily. Then he peered down at the dog, who was regarding him with caution.

'You say he's planning something?' Fitz asked.

Ever since I found the cabinet I've had the strangest feeling it's trying to communicate with me somehow. Like kidnapping one of my friends was just a way of getting my attention. All the artefacts it spews out, till the place where I live resembles an abandoned junkyard - am I supposed to recognise them? Or does it just want to feel at home? The old black-and-white TV - was that a hint of some kind? And what about the stained-glass window, the hero with a thousand faces, one of them my own? Is it supposed to tell me something?

Compassion, changed by her experiences after the cabinet whisks her away from her home, so that the grumpy old Compassion become the new Compassion, full of love and wonder - is she a message, too? Are these things intended to remind me of some vital memory?

What the cabinet is, maybe?

Or who I am?

There's only one way I can possibly find out. I must enter the cabinet myself.

Then, with the old magician's help, I must pass deeper, through the false back, that treacherous fourth

wall, and into whatever chasms lie beyond.

What will I find there? What will I be there? Because nobody who enters that cabinet can be the same when they emerge. Will I be king of the talking animals in some far land? A merman, my mother's family ascendant at last, in some dark fishy kingdom fathoms deep? A magician, advising a heroic king? Or an armoured knight in sapphire blue, my sword bright and strong and true, my questioning shield trusty and firm?

Whatever I become, I'm sure I'll be more myself than what I've been: an eccentric landlord, a neglectful son, an incompetent conjuror - and at my worst a ranting madman.

Oh, but am I up to playing such a part, whatever it might prove to be? And can I bear the changes the cabinet will bring? What's wrong, after all, with what I am? Except the mad part.

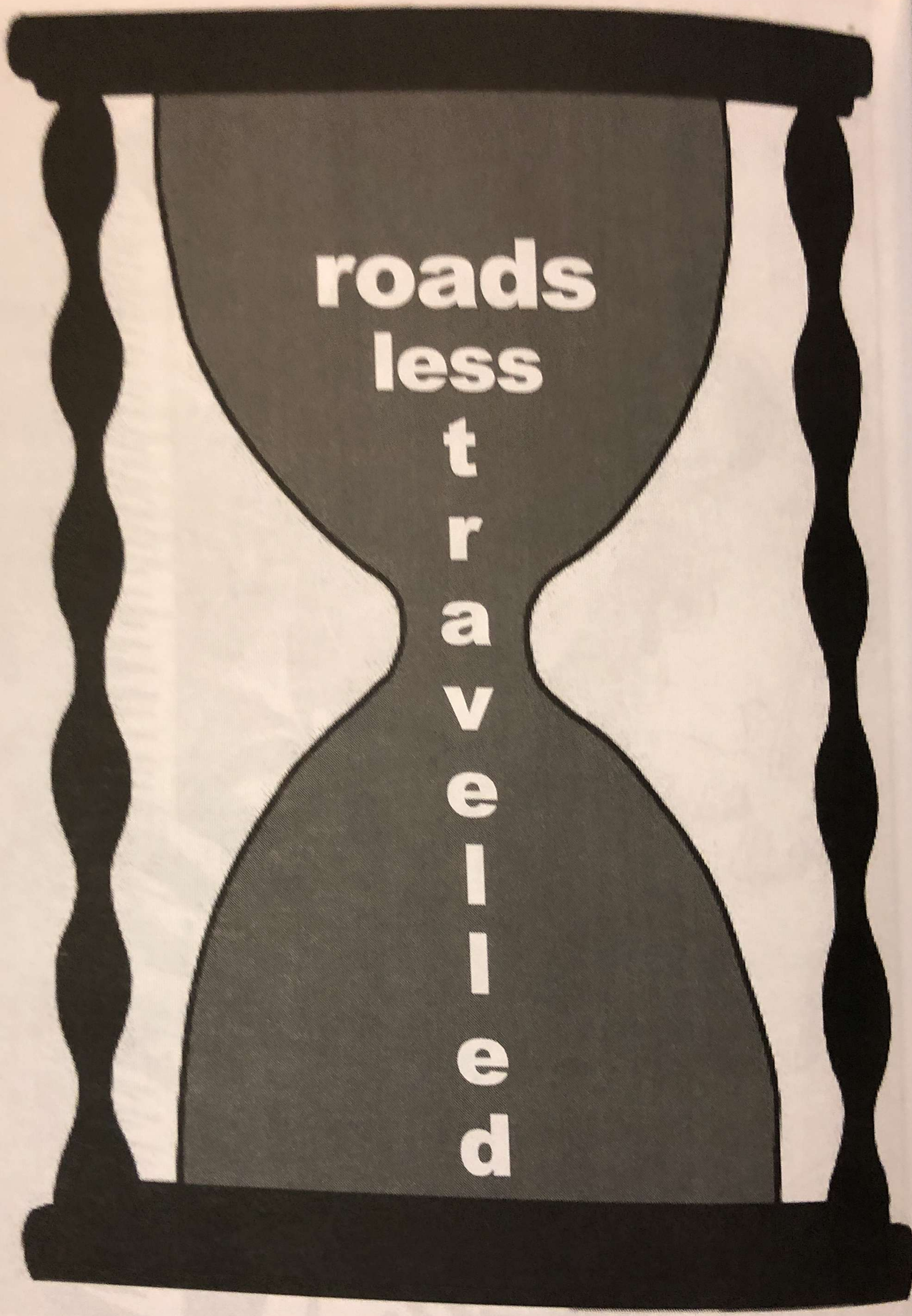
I have my friends. I have my house and my pets. I don't want to abandon them. I hate goodbyes.

I should burn the cabinet, ignite it on a pyre built from the wooden furniture it's so thoughtfully provided. Burn the stained-glass window too, watch those coloured splinters melt and run in bright chromatic rivulets. Watch the cabinet warp and twist, its midnight blue becoming black and charred, its stars consumed by a fire brighter than their own as orange flames rise high into the night sky. Burn all the possibilities, the destinations, the adventures. Turn back from change, burn away all possibility of being more or less than who I am, consume the cabinet in the fires of its own mutability. That would be a show to give my audience.

Is that then, finally, who I am? Who I will be?

Who am I?

Carolyn
2001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Carolyn 2001

Feeding Frenzy

by Stephen Gallagher

Everyone ran to the walls when the Needleship took a direct hit, high overhead, and some of them even got up there in time to see it come down. The Needleship was true to its name, too slender to make out apart from when the sun caught metal and made a flash that left a slow-fading mark at the back of the eye. They tracked it by the line of arrowing smoke as it ripped through the atmosphere, and someone called out that he'd seen the explosion as the pilot ejected.

Others doubted.

There was certainly no explosion when it reached the desert ground, some way outside the city's defensive ring. There was no detonation, no rain of burning fuel. Just a silent cloud of dust, rising. It was enormous and at this distance it looked perfect and sculpted, a flower blossoming in slow motion.

Lookouts studied the far-off site from the highest points of the city, using glasses and whatever instruments they could find that still worked. Did anything remain of the wreck? Was there anything that might be salvaged? Could the cloud be radioactive and if so, was there any sign of it drifting this way?

Nobody could say.

There was only one way to find anything out, and that was to send somebody out there.

They picked a burned-out second-level Knuckleman called Kobold, and for his second he picked a Recon named Jarad. They'd both seen too much action but they each had a proven knack for surviving it. Maybe it was just a luck gene. Both were handy soldiers but neither had any special skills worth preserving, so they were fit to be risked. Kobold had that dead-eyed stare of the marked-forever combatant, and Jarad was well on his way to acquiring it.

Kobold was nineteen, Jarad a couple of years younger. Both had been born into the siege and they'd been soldiers almost since they could walk.

They were told they'd have to ride out together on the same dust bike, to conserve fuel. They were each kitted in a patchwork of torn radiation suits, remnants so tattered that they had to be bound to their limbs and their bodies with several turns of cord. Cloth masks and goggles, one ration of water each and a radio, and they were on their way.

No crowd turned out to see them off. Kobold was in the saddle and Jarad stood on the bodywork behind him, braced and hanging on. They raised a following cloud of their own as they set out down a desert trail in the direction of the crash site.

The trail was little more than a faintly-swept line across the bare land. It took them out past empty bunkers, useless silos, abandoned sites that had once been a part of the defensive ring. Everything here had been stripped out to ensure that some other installation could carry on functioning. This was how the war had been kept going for so long; it had started with the highest of high-tech weapons and had eventually degenerated to spit and string and sheer determination. Now the two sides were like exhausted fighters, still landing punches, somehow still standing. The sleek athletes they'd once been were gone forever. Energies gone, reserves gone, everything gone. There was nothing left worth fighting for, but still they fought on. If there should ever be a victor he'd be a beaten hulk, and his victory would be a victory over nothing.

How had it started? Few could even remember.

Out beyond the ring, with the dust cloud still blotting out the sun, they'd begun to descend into a raw dirt valley before they realised that they were actually in the Needleship's impact trench. The aircraft had ploughed into the desert at a low angle, cutting right across the trail, breaking up as it went. Huge chunks of raw machinery were half-buried amongst a continuous litter of broken ship.

So they turned and followed the trench as far as it went, and at its end they found what was left of the Needleship's fuselage.

It was in two pieces, broken-backed. The part with the cabin was still intact, more or less. Dead

technology spilled like guts from the rent between the sections. Only this part remained. Tanks, engines, control systems — everything else was the debris they'd been riding through.

Kobold stopped the dust bike alongside, and Jarad climbed down. He was stiff and aching from having to brace himself and absorb every bump and jar from the terrain. Desert wind swirled the dust around them as Jarad poked around amongst the debris and Kobold picked his way through wreckage to take a look inside.

After a minute or so, Jarad heard a call.

"There's a body in here."

Then:

"It's still alive."

Jarad dropped the panel he'd been levering up out of the dirt, and scrambled inside.

The cabin interior was barely recognisable as such. It looked as if it had been trashed by a whirlwind. Kobold was crouched at the forward end. The pilot's seat was gone, along with the blowaway escape panel above it. The other seat's panel was also gone, but the seat itself had failed to eject. In the seat was a live body. Burned, bloodstained, but definitely a live body.

It was wearing a survival suit. But its chances of survival would have been enhanced even more if it hadn't been shot in the head.

Kobold was hunkered there, watching the damaged stranger, wary of getting too close as if the body in the chair might spring into action without warning.

Some chance. Jarad leaned forward and brushed some of the soot from the survival suit, uncovering part of the scorched insignia on the arm. It had frayed and almost burned away. Carefully, he poked the edges of the remaining pieces back together to get some idea of what the badge had been.

Then he looked at Kobold.

"This is what their generals wear," he said.

"How do you know?"

"We've all seen pictures. I'm a Recon. I'm supposed to remember things I see. You'd better get on the radio. Tell them to send out that Doctor."

The Needleship's cabin was the most protected part of its structure but, even so, it had never been intended for crash endurance. The general was doubly lucky to be alive. If you can call it luck, to live to fall into the hands of your enemies.

The Doctor did what he could with the standard field kit, under the close and suspicious supervision of Kobold and two further Knucklemen who'd brought the Doctor out here in the dune truck.

"I keep telling you I've got no medical training," he said as he fixed field dressings over entrance and exit wounds and turned the victim's head a little to ensure a clear airway. And he did this with reluctance, wary of making any neck injury worse.

"All I can do for him is to give him basic first aid," he said.

"Stop yakking and get on with it," Kobold said.

There were no painkillers. Every kit had been raided for them, years before.

"His pulse is strong and he's breathing well, but don't try to lift him out of the seat," the Doctor said. "We don't know what his injuries are. You need to keep him in the chair and cut the whole thing free. It'll be like a support for him until you can get him back to town."

Jarad was standing well back. There was little enough space in the cabin already, and Knucklemen tended to look down on Recons and curse them when they got in the way. He couldn't see much, but he could crane around and get an idea of what was going on.

"Is that a gunshot wound?" Kobold said.

"It looks like it," the Doctor said. "In under the jaw and out under the ear. He's going to need some major surgery."

One of the other Knucklemen snorted then. The city had no surgeons. All the trained doctors were out at frontline posts, and even their training was hardly the best. The city had low-level medics with only the most basic knowledge, and that was it.

Kobold said, "So what do you think happened?"

"At a guess?" From what Jarad could see, the Doctor was checking the crash victim's limbs, probing his midriff, looking for any other areas of serious injury. "The general here was a priority cargo. There was no explosion when the ship hit the ground, which suggests to me that they were carrying a minimum weight of fuel in order to achieve a maximum speed. Wherever they were trying to get him, they wanted him there in a hurry. Playing around with the fuel and weight equations can be a dangerous game. Doesn't matter how precise your figures are, the reality never is. Maybe there wasn't enough of a margin and that's how they dropped to within range of the ground batteries. Let me think."

The Doctor considered.

"They take a hit. The pilot can see right away that they aren't going to make it. Maybe he can manage a crash landing, but it's going to be right on the enemy's doorstep. What's the most important thing? Make sure the general doesn't fall into enemy hands. So before he looks to his own safety, he has to be certain he ejects his passenger."

Here, Jarad looked at the gaping square where exploding bolts had once held the eject panel above the general's flight position. The bolts had blown and the panel had gone, but the ejection unit hadn't fired.

"But the seat fails and his passenger doesn't go. What's he going to do now? There's only one option. He can't save the general but he can't risk leaving him to the enemy. So in the couple of seconds he has left, he has to make sure that he kills the general before ejecting himself."

"Not sure enough," Kobold said, and the Knucklemen made a low gurgling sound that, after a moment or two of attentive listening, might have been recognisable as laughter.

"Or else..." the Doctor said, and then he winced as if at a thought that wouldn't quite form. The crash victim coughed, then, the first real sign of life he'd shown since they'd found him.

When the Doctor had done what little he could for the survivor, he was turfed out of the cabin and sent to stand at a distance from the wreck. Jarad was assigned to watch him while the three Knucklemen brought tools from the dune truck and began working to cut the passenger couch free with its passenger still on it. They couldn't use torches, for fear of igniting the unused propellant in the seat. There was a lot of clattering and cursing.

"If he's lucky, he'll die," the Doctor said, hearing the oaths.

"If he's that lucky, so will you," Jarad said.

The Doctor looked out toward the city. Another dust plume was rising. More vehicles were coming out. A captured general was a serious coup, maybe even a turning point in the progress of the war. Not just because of what he was, but more importantly for what he might know.

If they could get it out of him.

"What's the matter with you?" Jarad said.

"Just thinking," the Doctor said.

He'd been picked up as a spy, moving amongst the crowds in the heart of the besieged city. He'd disguised himself to blend in well enough, but he'd failed to realise that in a city besieged for generations there are no strangers. Under interrogation he'd tried the old "I'm just a traveller," line, and he'd been in confinement ever since. He called himself the Doctor but he said he knew no medicine. The man couldn't even keep his story straight.

Here came the first vehicle with its enormous balloon wheels. There were three vehicles in all. The lead one was personal transport for Brooligan, high muck-a-muck and commander of the regional defence forces. The second was his personal guard and a bunch of Recons and the one coming up behind was just a plain old open load carrier, the kind used for carting scaffolding and building stone around. None was exactly what you'd call easy on the eye. All had the look of junkyard salvage pieces but then, there wasn't a working vehicle in the city that didn't.

Brooligan had a TV crew in tow. It wasn't just a matter of the general's strategic potential, here. Bringing down an enemy plane was always good for morale. A plane with a live enemy was a thousand times better. People had been starved of anything to celebrate, and they'd starved for too long. The Knucklemen stopped what they were doing and waited for Brooligan, and Brooligan said, "So where is he? I want to see him."

He went inside, and so did the crew and the camera lights, and when there was enough footage to make it clear that Brooligan was in charge of the situation he withdrew and the dismantlers went back

to work. There were more of them now. Instead of trying to cut the chair out of the fuselage, they worked to cut the fuselage away from around the chair.

The Doctor spoke up from the back, then.

He said, "Excuse me. There's a chance that this situation may not be all it seems."

Brooligan turned, looked at him.

"Who's this?" he said.

Jarad hadn't expected to have to speak, and the words caught in his throat.

"Enemy prisoner, sir."

Brooligan indicated the wreck, with incredulity.

"From that?" he said.

"No, sir. A spy. Captured in the city."

"Why's he here?"

"He calls himself a doctor."

Brooligan started to turn away.

"You need to hear this," the Doctor insisted, and that was all that he had to say because one of the Knucklemen stepped in and felled him with a blow from a weighted glove. He hit the ground like a sack of stones, moved once as if to rise, and then didn't move again. Jarad and the Knuckleman dragged him to one of the vehicles and heaved him on board.

When the others had cut the chair free, it took eight of them to lift it onto the load platform of the third truck. The Recons were left behind to search the wreckage, with orders to follow the wide trail all the way back along the impact site. They were to dig for plans, for documents, for anything that might be of use or interest.

The rest of them headed back to the city in convoy. Jarad hitched a ride on the open truck rather than make a second journey clinging to the back of the dust bike. They'd rigged a canvas cover to shade the captured general, and they'd lashed his supporting framework to the load platform. The original safety harness kept him from falling out.

He'd made it so far, but Jarad wondered if the man would survive the journey back. It was a rough ride for someone so badly injured. Jarad had overheard that there were real doctors being summoned back from the front line to deal with him, on their way even now.

He was a prize, there was no doubting that. Even dead he'd be a prize. But a live enemy... in a war where death happened at a distance and at the push of a button, sight of a live enemy was almost unheard of.

As they jolted their way along, Jarad crawled under the canvas awning and pulled himself upright by the general.

The general's good eye was open, and was looking straight at him.

The rest of his face was a blood-caked mess. A couple more degrees of angle and the pilot would have blown his brains out, as intended. As it was, the general had been left mutilated and on the edge of life. If they were going to get information out of him, it would have to be by some other means of communication than speech. The general would probably never speak for himself again.

He was trying to, though.

The truck jolted hard over a gully, and the general cried out loud as Jarad hung on.

"Don't expect pity from me," Jarad said.

rend, the general seemed to be saying.

"What?"

rend.

"I'm not your friend," Jarad said. "Nobody here's your friend. Welcome to hell. You don't like it, you shouldn't have helped to make it what it is."

As they drew close to the walls of the city, the first of the crowds could be seen. There was obviously some plan that Jarad didn't know about, because the trucks slowed without stopping and the Knucklemen from the vehicle ahead were jumping down to the ground and then boarding his own as it drew level.

"Be off with you, Recon," one of them said, and gave him a rough shove that sent him sprawling in the dirt.

It wasn't a hard landing, and Jarad got back to his feet and trotted in the wake of the truck.

They threw back the canvas and heaved the chair upright so that the general hung in his straps in a standing position. They fixed it in place, and then with their knuckleknives they cut the clothing from him until he was left naked. He was scrawny, and his body was covered in healed scars and tattoos. All of his dignity was gone and every one of his injuries was plainly visible as the truck entered the narrow streets and the crowds surged forward around it.

Jarad couldn't keep up with it, then. The crowds were too dense, and there was a display of emotion like none he'd never seen. They were howling. They were fighting to get over each other, desperate to get to the enemy. The Knucklemen were there to fend them off.

It escalated in seconds. Brooligan had no doubt envisaged a triumphal progress through the streets, a managed release of pent-up animal passions. Himself leading the way, the enemy on show right behind him. But everyone ignored him and went straight for the truck with the naked prisoner.

The Knucklemen were unprepared. They'd expected an obedient crowd letting off steam, not a full-blown riot. They were shouting to their driver, but their driver couldn't hear. He was trying to follow his orders, trying to follow Brooligan's truck up ahead, trying to continue with the increasingly chaotic pageant.

Up on the truck, hanging in his upright frame, the prisoner raised his head. He'd little strength, but the sheer volume of sound and emotion had roused him. With his good eye he gazed out blearily, helplessly. What could he be making of what he saw? How much could he understand?

And Jarad thought, Enemy or no enemy, this is wrong.

They came into the city's main square, the Square of the Twelve Pillars, and there the procession was slowed even more and then finally halted. The crowd were out of control. Brooligan was leaning out of his vehicle and beckoning and the Knucklemen were firing into the air, but there was little they could do against such a solid, pushing mass of people.

At the still heart of it all hung the prisoner, gazing helplessly out at the mob. Uncomprehending object of their hatred, bewildered victim of their fury.

Somebody threw something, but it missed.

Then a man threw himself over the front of the crowd, riding them like a wave, something fluttering in his hand; it was a rag, a handkerchief, and for a moment the Knucklemen to either side were distracted by the masses that were pawing at them and he was able to get through. One of them noticed the assailant after a moment and drove him back with a kick, but not before he'd succeeded in his bid. The man fell back with his trophy held high, his cloth red with the enemy's blood, and if the crowd had been explosive before they went nuclear now.

The trucks were starting to rock. The crowd was rising in a single tide, every member of it urged on by the same idea. The Knucklemen were no longer firing into the air but were firing right into them now, firing on their own people, and bodies were falling but the mob just came on. The Knucklemen's weapons were taken from them and the Knucklemen themselves were pitched to the ground. The truck was overrun. The prisoner on the back of it disappeared in a mass of bodies.

He reappeared once, briefly, as within a few moments the lines had been cut and the framework to which he was harnessed was tipped forward and off the truck. He was raised into the air above their heads before plunging, face-first, toward the ground. When it hit the ground, the crowd closed in.

He might have appeared once more, tossed like a puppet, worried by the crowd as a dog might throw a doll before dismembering it. By now he'd been abandoned by his captors. The trucks were charging their way out of the melee, spinning people aside and forcing others to scramble.

Nobody was interested in stopping them any longer. When they reached the edge of the crowd they put on speed, and the last few bodies scattered out of the way.

Jarad saw how, at the centre of the mob, the crowd boiled, and boiled red.

You could almost feel the shock in the citadel building, a palpable thing. All was quiet in this part of town, and that increased the sense of strangeness. Nobody barred Jarad's way as he went in through the main lobby. Through more than one open door he could hear intense conversations going on, but the security desk out in the public area wasn't manned.

Calm on the streets was returning. The riot — there was no other word for it — had ended quickly. Of the captive that had been its focus, there was nothing to be found.

Nothing recognisable, anyway.

One faction had gone looking for the spy with the idea of giving him the same treatment, but it quickly emerged that he had never returned from the desert. The vehicle into which he'd been thrown had returned without him. Nobody knew at what point he'd slipped away from them.

Jarad found someone in Brooligan's outer offices, and was told to wait. He found himself a chair and sat. He saw Kobold emerging from one of the debriefing rooms down the hall. The Knuckleman looked red-eyed and pale, and he shambled. Jarad tried to catch his eye, but he didn't succeed.

About an hour later he was called in.

He'd expected to have to argue his way through a series of minor officials, but he came straight into the presence of the top man himself.

Brooligan was a man who looked as if he'd wasted quickly. His clothes didn't seem to fit and he shifted inside them as if they itched. He looked at Jarad as if he'd been hoping he might bring answers, but had abandoned the hope as soon as it came within reach. Now he just wanted him to say his piece and be dismissed.

"I think we're in even bigger trouble than you imagine," Jarad said.

"We're not in trouble," Brooligan said. "We had a situation and it's been contained. We won't let it happen again."

"The prisoner wasn't a general."

"You said he was."

"I identified a general's insignia. A general's uniform doesn't necessarily mean that the man inside it has to be a general."

"Who was he, then?"

"When the Knucklemen stripped him, I could see that he had Thornflower tattoos. Thornflowers only grow in the desert. The enemy doesn't have them. I think he was one of ours."

"A traitor?"

"Prisoner of war. Maybe one of the Recons that never came back."

"Well, it's entirely academic now. We're not going to get anything out of him."

"I think we already got more out of him than we bargained for," Jarad said. "I think we just lost the war."

It took two days for the Doctor to make the trek back across the desert to the city, walking by night and sheltering by day, and by the time he reached the gates it was all but over.

The gates stood open. Some had tried to run. He'd passed their silent camps by the trail.

A few bodies lay in the streets, but mostly the streets were empty. The plague had hit fast and hard.

He'd seen something like it once before. In less sophisticated times an invading army had been known to catapult the rotting and diseased carcases of pigs and sheep over the walls of a besieged town, hoping to infect or pollute the environment of those within.

This time the methods had been more subtle, the end more sure.

The odd sound as he moved through the streets told him that there was still life within some of the buildings, but he knew it couldn't last. There was nothing he could do for them, not for any of them. He kept a long cloth wrapped around his face and head to keep out the sun and the smell. He'd no fear of the infective agent, not now. Any danger would have been evident long before this. It was, frankly, unlikely. Although his outward appearance was similar to the local species, there was little else physically that they had in common.

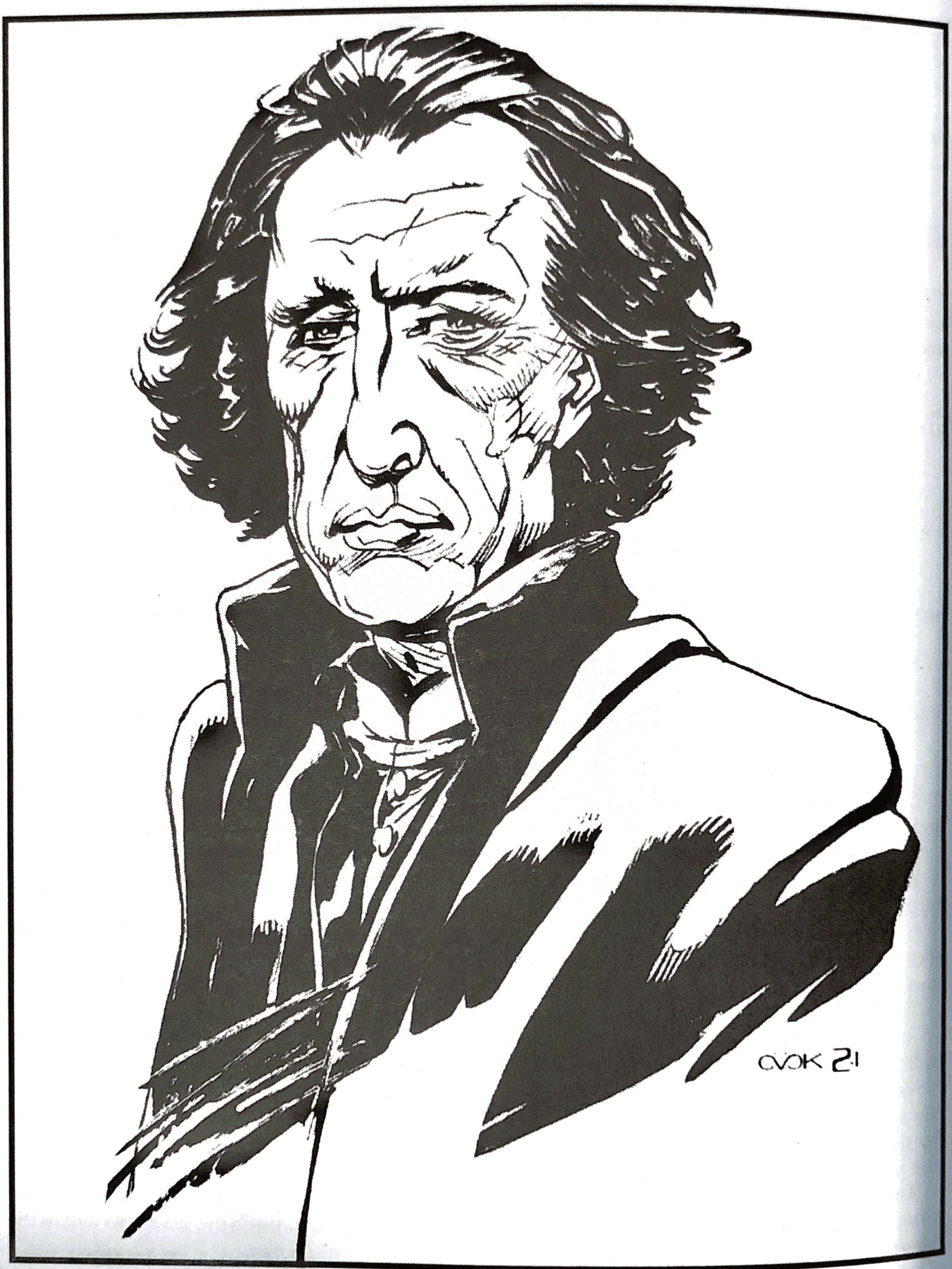
Appearances deceive. In the Square of the Twelve Pillars, where a still-smouldering pyre represented a vain effort to cleanse the flesh that was beyond salvation, he walked through the smoke to where the thirteenth pillar stood, unnoticed by all.

At his signal, the pillar's outline melted and reformed to its more familiar shape.

Sometime soon, at a guess, the enemy's aircraft would take advantage of the lowered defences and move in to sterilise the area with flash-bombs.

The fruits of victory? A burned-out hole in a desert.

There was nothing more for him to do but enter, and move on.


CVOK 21

True Colours

by Steven Kitson

He stepped from the TARDIS and took a moment to familiarise himself with his surroundings. The scanner had told him that the room was empty, but the screen was a poor substitute. He made himself aware of the space, let his instincts identify the danger points, the possible escape routes and available cover.

The room only had one door, and he went straight to it. The corridor outside was full of shadows; the moonlight filtering through the glazed ceiling bathed everything in silver. A cleaning robot buzzed softly along the floor, happily digesting the micro-thin layer of dust that had accumulated over the day. The Doctor closed the door as quietly as he had opened it.

He counted off the seconds, and as he did so, he could not help but recall Tara's face, as the energy bullet tore into her back and exploded inside her. Her mouth open in shock, her eyes filled with pain for just a moment before the life left them. They had coldly executed her for telling him about this place, and he was not going to let her sacrifice be in vain.

When he had finished counting, he nudged the door open again, wider this time. By now, the robot was within easy reach, and he pulled a disc from his coat, slapping it onto the battered casing. The robot halted in its tracks and gave a plaintive whine before sinking a couple of inches to rest on the tiled floor.

The Doctor slipped into the corridor and started along it, keeping to the shadows. His target was not far; Tara's information had been very precise. Just like everything else about her. He felt anger rising again, but crushed it quickly. There'd be time for that in a moment; right now he needed to think clearly. It wouldn't do to get this close and spoil everything by doing something stupid.

His back flat against the wall, he eased under a security camera. He was impressed. If he had not known where to look, he might not have spotted it. He slipped around the corner and paused.

Warm light bled out from a small window in the door at the end of the corridor, drawing his eyes towards it. The end was in sight, which meant he had to be more careful now than ever if he wanted his arrival to be a surprise. He made his way down the edge of the corridor, stepping cautiously over the pressure-sensitive tiles in the floor.

Once at the door he could hear faint sounds of off-key singing coming from inside. He tried to block the noise out and concentrate on the lock. There was a faint buzz, and the door opened a fraction of a centimetre. The Doctor relaxed, slowly let the breath he had been holding out of his lungs in a quiet sigh. The singing stopped.

Abandoning subtlety, the Doctor quickly put his back against the door and turned into the room, his left hand slipping into his pocket and emerging with a stubby black handgun.

The office was big, taking up an entire corner of the building. Just the desk was the size of some of the smaller offices, a dark alien wood that glistened where it wasn't covered in paper. The huge leather chair was turned away from him, looking out over the million twinkling lights of the city.

He couldn't see anyone in the room. He pointed the gun at the centre of the chair's back.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are' he called.

Silence.

He stepped away from the door slowly, towards the nearest corner of the desk. Paused. Then again, one step at a time.

He was halfway there when the shape reared up above the level of the desk. His highly tuned senses screamed danger, and he was on the floor and rolling before his mind had properly processed what he had seen.

The energy bolt passed so close that he felt his skin tingle. As he rolled he saw it impact the wall behind him, the discharge of energy seeming to invert the colours, turning the scene into a photographic negative for a fraction of a second before the excited molecules released their energy and the wood

He came up into a crouch under the lip of the desk, the corner separating him and his attacker: Gil Tarron, the man he had come to find. But that was secondary now. Tarron faded into insignificance beside the weapon he had been holding. He'd only had a glance, he could have been mistaken; but he knew, he *knew* that he wasn't.

No time to think about it now, though. Would Tarron expect him to go the long way around the desk or the short? Mentally, he tossed a coin.

With a fluid movement he vaulted onto the top of the desk, took two steps across it and jumped down, his feet slamming into Tarron's back and bearing him to the ground. The weapon flew from his hand, landing out of reach on the plush carpet. With a glance the Doctor determined that he was now unarmed, reached down and flipped him over so that he looked straight into the muzzle of the pistol.

'Where did you get that?' he asked, trying to keep his voice level.

Tarron just shook his head. The Doctor raised the pistol and whipped it across Tarron's face. His head slammed back against the floor and bounced up again, blood welling from his nose. 'Where?'

'Why do you care?' Tarron managed to gasp.

'Because I know what it is,' the Doctor said, his aim again fixed on Tarron's forehead. 'Do you?'

'I was given it. He told me to kill you with it.'

'Who?'

'Can't say.'

The pistol flashed down again. There was the wet sound of breaking bone.

'He... he said he'd kill me.' The words were less distinct now as Tarron tried to speak around gashed lips.

'I'm going to kill you. That's why I came here. But first, you're going to tell me who gave you that gun.'

There must have been something in his eyes that told Tarron he was serious, because the bald man's bravado dropped away. 'Okay,' he slurred. And then his eyes rolled up in their sockets. A gurgling sound came from his throat, but no words.

The Doctor put his hand on Tarron's forehead. It was hot, fever hot. Some sort of cerebral destructor, implanted presumably without his knowledge to stop him talking about the weapon.

The weapon. The Doctor stood, leaving Tarron to stain the carpet, and picked it up. It was still warm from the shot, and it looked just like he remembered: a simple hollow cylinder with four vanes along the side, a sphere at one end and a wire leading to a jury-rigged power unit with a large button that functioned as a trigger. He'd hoped never to see another.

He stepped on the second pressure-sensitive tile as he left the office, sauntered down the middle of the corridor in full view of the security camera. He knew he would be gone before any of the guards could even get close.

With the weapon in his hand he slipped into the TARDIS. He set it on top of the console as he worked the controls, setting co ordinates that he still knew off by heart. With no other leads, there was only one place to go, back to the beginning again. Whoever had changed things, they had to have done it there.

The trip didn't take long. Perhaps the time ship sensed his urgency, chose a more direct route through the vortex than usual; perhaps he was just lucky. He didn't dwell on it, just sent a quick message of thanks through the telepathic circuits, felt the warmth of the TARDIS' satisfaction at his praise.

The air was dry, dead, and the dust stung his skin. The TARDIS, he saw, hadn't bothered to disguise itself. Perhaps it knew that there was no point. So it sat on the dirty brown sand in its new default form, the blue incongruous among the misshapen ruins of the desolate landscape.

He turned once to get his bearings, then set off. As he walked he looked around, alert for signs that something had changed. But nothing had; the planet was exactly as he had left it; silent and still...

He had committed genocide here. Destroyed an entire species in infancy, dashed a future against the rocks. It wasn't the first time, of course, and it certainly wasn't the last; but it still frightened him a little because it was the only time that he'd *enjoyed* it. There had been times when he'd felt satisfaction, of course, of a job well done, of justice delivered; when he'd acted out of righteous anger or cold logic. But never before or since had he felt such pleasure at destruction.

The entrance was still there, a doorway half-buried in a mound of earth, leading down into the ground. The heavy metal door had been buckled inward by some impact that only it now remembered and lay just outside the tunnel, eroding quietly in the wind.

He hesitated at the threshold, fancied he smelt the stench of death wafting up from the planet's core. He couldn't tell whether it was a real smell or simply a product of the way this dead world affected his imagination. Steeling himself, he ducked into the shadows and started downwards.

He saw the first corpse a few minutes later, when he turned a corner. It had been a woman. She might have been attractive; but now her skin was desiccated, her eyes sunken into their sockets and her dry skin stretched tight over her bones. She was slumped next to a door, her left hand gripping the handle even now. She must have been trying to get in when the bomb went off in the atmosphere, the hard radiation instantly killing all life on the planet, even the germs and microbes that should have eaten away her body long ago.

He had watched them launch the bomb, and he hadn't protested. 'Just to make sure', they had said, and he had nodded, still burning with hatred and revenge. He had turned away from the window before it exploded, though, unable to watch, seeing instead the harsh shadows of all those in the observation gallery in a grotesque frieze against the far wall.

He stepped over her carefully and hurried on. He had no firm destination in mind; he had expected to find something different here, something changed, some reason why technology belonging to a race that he himself had destroyed millennia previously had turned up in Tarron's hands. But there was nothing, no sign that anything had survived. Perhaps he was too late, in the wrong place. Perhaps whoever it was had already been Ñ before the Bomb? Ñ and taken what they wanted, rescued enough genetic material to start again. Perhaps on some unsuspecting planet light years and centuries away, a production plant was churning out an army of -

A noise behind him. He spun, the pistol already in his hand. He squinted, the light almost too dim even for his sensitive eyes.

There. On the other side of the large room, a man stepped out from a side-tunnel, walking casually towards him. The figure was dressed sharply in a dark suit, and his voice when he spoke was rich and cultured. 'Doctor. I thought you wouldn't be able to resist that little bit of bait.'

'Jestocost.'

'Well, not exactly. I couldn't be here in person. So busy these days, you know how it is. So I sent this instead. Impressive, *n'est-ce pas*?'

'I should have known you couldn't leave well alone. I warned you.'

'Oh, Doctor, you misunderstand. No one cares about the unfortunate inhabitants of this little planet any more. No one but you. Which is how I knew that you'd come here as soon as you found the present I left Tarron. How is he, by the way?'

'Dead.'

'You killed him?' He smiled. 'I can't say he didn't deserve it.'

The two men seemed to size each other up.. 'Why did you want me here?'

'You've done some good work for us in the past.'

'I don't owe you anything more!'

'But I'm afraid something's come up and, well, your loyalties are in doubt.'

The Doctor blinked. 'What is it?'

'Oh, that would be telling. Right. I'm very sorry about this, but I'm going to have to kill you now. It's been nice working with you.' He raised his arm and the Doctor saw the suit and hand, everything from his elbow downwards, melt and run and resolve itself into a matte black cannon muzzle. He barely ducked out of the way of the spitting ball of plasma that burst against the damp concrete wall behind him.

The Doctor had faced danger many times in his long life, and he knew exactly what to do in situations like this. He turned on his heel and ran.

He was mildly surprised at finding himself still alive twenty minutes later.

The android hadn't even tried to follow him, which had bothered him until he realised that it was

making the sensible tactical move of waiting for him at the exit. Why waste energy looking for your prey, and risk allowing him to sneak around you, when you can just let him come to you?

But that meant he had an advantage. He had been here before, and he knew a few things that Jestocost didn't, including the other way out, if it hadn't collapsed by now. He set off deeper into the complex, his shoes squelching in the puddles of water that had collected on the floor.

It took him a long time to find, and that was the easiest part. One entire wall of the room that the vent was in had collapsed, partly blocking the already-small entrance. He clambered over the rubble and peered into the tight space. It looked clear, although he could only see for the first hundred yards before it turned a sharp corner. But there was no other way that hadn't been sealed, that he hadn't sealed personally, and there was no time like the present. He lay down flat on the debris and began pushing his body through the opening.

He moved slowly, wriggling his shoulders from side to side to provide the necessary friction with the tunnel walls. His coat was in tatters before he was halfway to the corner. The robot must have been waiting a long time. But it wouldn't get bored, which was presumably why Jestocost had used an android in the first place. There was no telling exactly when he would arrive after discovering the gun.

His heart sank as he turned the final corner. There was light up ahead, but only where it streamed through narrow cracks in the rubble that blocked his only way to the surface. He paused for a few minutes, weighed up going back. He even tried wriggling the other way, but it proved even more difficult than going forwards so he pressed on, eventually coming face to face with the barrier. It wasn't that thick; he spent a few painful minutes contorting himself to bring his arms around in front of him and, bracing his feet against the sides of the tunnel, pushed.

He felt the rocks move, and dust fell into the enclosed space. When he had finished sneezing he braced, pushed again. This time the obstruction erupted outward, harsh daylight streaming down on to his face, almost blinding him.

When his eyes had adjusted he stuck his head out of the hole, took a quick look all around and ducked back out of sight. The android was out there, between the entrance and the TARDIS. The time ship was only fifty metres away from him, but it was in the middle of a clearing in the ruins and for the last ten he would be completely exposed. He wouldn't even get the key in the lock.

But perhaps he wouldn't need to. If he could get between the android and the ship...

He popped out of the hole in the ground as quietly as he could, made his way carefully across the desolate landscape, staying behind the cover of half-destroyed walls and pillars left with nothing to support. When he had gone as far as he could go, he gathered all his remaining strength and sprinted for the blue safety.

The android swung instantly to face him, raising its gun-arm and tracking with him as he moved. When he judged he was directly between it and the TARDIS, the Doctor dived for the ground. For a moment a fully charged plasma cannon, ready to fire, was pointed directly at the TARDIS. It vanished with a loud pop as air rushed to fill the sudden vacuum.

The android didn't even blink, just swung its gun-arm down to point at the Doctor as he lay helpless.

He never knew whether it was the sound, the sudden displacement of a couple of cubic metres of air, the disappearance of the sun or its mass sensors that alerted it, but the result was almost comical as the assassin looked upwards just in time to see a police box fall from the sky, crushing it against the hard rock.

The Doctor stood up, brushing the dust off his ruined coat and not for the first time feeling a warm glow of pride at his ingenuity in turning a obsolete defence system into an offensive weapon. He wandered up to the TARDIS, kicking the android's severed hand out of the way, unlocked the door and went inside.

The first thing he did was slip off his coat and look at it sadly. It was too far gone to be repaired. He flung it over the back of the chaise longue and headed for the console.

The second thing he did was access the TARDIS' logs of temporal activity. Jestocost would want to know when his trap had been sprung Ñ and sure enough there was an intertemporal transmission, from inside the complex, just over an hour ago. He watched as the holographic display spun in more dimensions than three, tracing the signal's path through the vortex and finally to...

'Of course,' he muttered, nodding. He told the TARDIS to follow the beam, but that it needn't hurry

this time; better to arrive rested and fully fit. His favourite planet was in danger, and it was up to him to save it. Again.

He sipped tea at one of the café's outside tables as he watched the groups of besuited employees wander back into the towering office building. It sparked in the noonday sun, all glass and steel, a style that had been in vogue a couple of decades ago. And just the sort of thing Jestocost loved.

He hadn't as much time as he would have liked; Jestocost would likely start his plan as soon as he had received word that the Doctor had fallen into his trap, and therefore wouldn't be showing up to thwart him. Which meant he had to get in there tonight.

He finished the tea, stood up and crossed the road, nimbly dodging the moving vehicles. Then he turned and walked straight into a petite young woman with a long ponytail, knocking her to the ground.

His face crumpled as he reached his hand down to her. 'I'm sorry,' he babbled, 'so, so sorry. My fault, completely my fault.'

She took his hand and let him pull her to her feet. 'I'm fine,' she mumbled, trying not to meet his gaze.

'No, really, I am so sorry. You must let me make it up to you. Clare.'

She looked at him then, half-opened her mouth as if to ask a question. He gave her his best charming grin, and it must have worked, because some of the anger drained out of the expression, and nodded to the security pass fixed to her lapel.

'It's fine, really it is. Look, excuse me.' She tried to get past him but he stepped sideways to block her.

'But I feel really guilty now. Tell you what, how about I buy you dinner tonight?'

She looked for a moment like she was considering the offer. That was one of the things he liked about this body. But eventually she shook her head. 'Sorry. I have a rule not to date strange men who bodyslam me in the street.'

The Doctor quickly switched to his injured-puppy look. 'Well, okay then. If it's a rule.'

She tilted her head and smiled a little. 'A big one. Sorry.'

He shrugged. 'I'd better let you get on.'

'Oh. Yes. Nice meeting... actually, no, it was painful. But it was nice talking to you.' And she was gone through the big glass doors. The Doctor wandered off to find a flower shop.

He arrived back an hour later with a bouquet so big he could hardly see past it. He turned sideways so that he could speak to the receptionist. 'Flowers,' he said.

The receptionist chewed her pencil a little while she considered this. She took the pencil out of her mouth, muttered 'you don't say' and put it back. She chewed a bit more.

'They're for Clare Garland,' the Doctor prompted. 'She works here.'

It took slightly longer for the woman to digest this new piece of information. Then she removed the pencil again and used the gnarled end to dial a number on the telephone beside her computer. She picked up the receiver and listened. 'Weird man here with flowers for you,' she said, and 'dark hair, sounds a bit Irish, navy coat' and then 'yeah, he is a bit' with a grin. She tucked the receiver between chin and shoulder and pointed to the lift doors with her pencil. 'Third floor.'

The Doctor nodded and started toward the lift. One of the security guards helpfully pressed the call button to save him having to let go of his flowers and he smiled his appreciation. Behind him he heard the receptionist say 'he's on his way up. He's walking away from me now.' And then, quieter, something that sounded like 'which is easy on the eye, believe you me.'

The lift arrived and he stepped inside, pressed the button for the third floor. As the doors slid closed he saw the receptionist wave to him with the hand that wasn't holding the pencil in her mouth.

The journey to the third floor was uneventful, so he took the opportunity to connect a small piece of advanced technology to the electronics behind the button panel.

Clare was pleased with the flowers, but eyed their purveyor suspiciously. 'Persistent, aren't you?'

The Doctor, having rested the bouquet against her desk, could now shrug without causing a major floral disaster, and did so. 'Just to say sorry.'

'You said sorry already!'

'Well, this time I'm saying it with flowers.'

'That's a lot of flowers.'

'I'm very sorry. You should put those in water, by the way.'

'I'm still not going to have dinner with you, I'm afraid. I have a boyfriend.'

He shrugged again, his shoulders enjoying their liberty. 'I thought you might, someone like you. Oh well. Enjoy the flowers.'

'I will,' she called after him.

He gave the still-chewing receptionist a smile on the way out, danced across the road again and made his way down a side street to where he had left the TARDIS. From the console he activated the piece of advanced technology and told it to access the building's central computer and find out whatever it could without being noticed. It reported back with plans of the first seven floors of the building, complete with full details of the security systems. They looked standard for this time period: infrared tripwires, closed circuit cameras, nothing too difficult to foil. Of course there was no telling what could be waiting on the top two floors, but he'd have to deal with that when he came to it.

He asked the piece of advanced technology what it thought it could do in the way of switching off the security systems without being detected, and the answer was 'not much'. It could leave a window open, but that was about it.

At eight o'clock that night, the Doctor climbed through an open window and into the ground floor of the building. The first three floors were, as he expected, little trouble.

He was just stepping off the staircase when he saw her. She was in a suit, she had blonde hair cut into a short bob, and she was about to break an infrared tripwire and alert the entire security staff to the fact that there were intruders in the building.

There was only one thing for it. He took two long strides down the corridor and launched himself at her, sending them both crashing to the floor. He was on his feet again within a second, holding out his hand to her. She eyed it with disdain and pulled herself up. He reflected that he shouldn't make a habit of meeting women like this.

She broke the silence. 'Who are you?' she asked, and 'what the Hell are you doing here?'

He glanced up and down the corridor before turning to her with his finger pressed to his lips. He peered through the window set into the nearest door, opened it and motioned for her to go through.

She ignored his invitation, but when she spoke again her voice was much softer. 'What do you think you're playing at?'

He rolled his eyes. 'You were about to set off the alarm. If I hadn't stopped you there would be security guards all over this floor by now.'

'Uh huh. Still doesn't explain why you're sneaking around here after hours in the first place.'

'What about you?'

'I work here.'

'Are you meant to be here now?' She didn't answer. 'I'm the Doctor.'

'Which doctor?'

He shook the door that he was still holding open. 'Can we talk in here, please? It's slightly safer.'

The woman looked him up and down appraisingly. She still seemed unsure, but she went past him into the room. He followed her and closed the door carefully behind them.

The woman spoke first. 'So, who are you?'

'I told you, I'm the Doctor.'

'So, what, I'm supposed to call you 'the Doctor'?'

'Just Doctor will do fine.'

She frowned. 'What, is this supposed to be some kind of code name?'

'You could say that.'

'So what are you, some kind of secret agent?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'And why are you here?'

He turned away from her, looking around the meeting room. He picked a whiteboard marker from the table, began twirling it absently between the fingers of one hand. 'You work for Mr Jerome.'

'He's the CEO, yes.'

'He's also an alien.'

The Doctor was prepared for almost any reaction except the one he got. She fixed him with a penetrating stare and asked 'how did you know?'

The marker stopped spinning. '*You* knew?'

'Why do you think I'm here? He has some sort of weird plan to do with the new satellites.'

He started the marker moving again, this time in figures-of-eight around his hand. 'How did you find out?'

'Does it matter?'

She met his gaze for a few moments, and then backed down. 'I wasn't sure, okay? I didn't have any proof. But he's weird, lets hardly anyone near him, hardly ever leaves the top two floors. And little things he says, the way he acts... I could tell.'

'Read a lot of science fiction, do you?'

Her posture shifted, became more defensive. 'Well, you think he is too. How do you know?'

'Because I'm an alien too.' That shut her up, at least for the moment. He went back to the door, looked through the glass panel. 'So what do you know about the satellites?'

She was still looking shocked. 'You're really an...'

'Yes. The satellites?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. That's why I'm here, I'm trying to get to his office.'

'We're heading the same way, then. We'll have a better chance of not setting off the alarms if we stick together.' He set the marker pen back on the table, looked up as if he'd remembered something. 'I'm sorry; I've been terribly rude. I haven't asked your name.'

'Borden,' she said. 'Jenny Borden.'

He glanced through the window again. 'The coast's clear. Ready, Jenny?'

Jenny nodded. He nodded back and pulled the door open. They both slipped through and into the corridor.

With the Doctor pointing out the security systems, they moved quickly through the building. Not as quickly as if he had been on his own, but the human was young and didn't slow his progress too much. And she was full of useful information.

'Last one launched last week,' she was saying as they approached the corner before the staircase up to the seventh floor. 'They're just about ready to...'

The Doctor waved his hand frantically. She got the message and shut up, and he crept forward and peeked around the corner. A security guard sat just beside the stairs, in easy reach of an alarm button mounted on the wall.

He slipped his hand in his pocket, stepped around the corner. The guard must have seen the movement out of the corner of his eye; he stood and reached for the button. His hand got halfway there before the crackling energy discharge from the Doctor's pistol enveloped him, throwing him back against the wall. He twitched and then lay still.

The Doctor slipped the pistol back into his pocket and turned to see Jenny staring at the body in horror. 'What did you do?' she asked.

'He was going for the alarm,' he explained, heading for the stairs. He was halfway up before he realised Jenny wasn't with him.

She was bending over the guard, her hand on his neck. 'He's dead,' she said, a questioning tone in her voice.

'Well, yes.' He held up the pistol. 'Clean and fatal. No mess.'

Jenny stood, still looking down at the body. 'You killed him. You actually killed him.'

He moved down the stairs towards her. 'I couldn't let him set off the alarm.'

'And you couldn't knock him out or something?'

'He might have found a way to alert Jest- Jerome before we get out.' He stepped off the staircase. 'I'm trying to save the whole world here, Jenny.'

'What?'

'Those satellites are carrying energy-wave generators that will converge at the centre of the Earth. Together with the anti-matter influx from a ground station, they'll turn the planet into a huge fission bomb.'

'How do you know all this?'

'It's one of the standard ways of destroying a planet.'

'You have standard ways of destroying *planets*?'

'They're not used very often.'

She took a step away from him.

'I'm here trying to save this planet. Every human being in the universe will die if I don't stop Jerome.'

'So it's okay for you to kill a few along the way?'

They glared at each other, neither willing to back down. Eventually the Doctor broke the silence. 'We don't have time for this. He could send the activation signal to those satellites any minute.'

For a second Jenny looked like she was going to argue; but she just walked past the Doctor and up the stairs. She paused at the top. 'Coming?' she asked without looking round.

He leapt the staircase in three bounds of his long legs. As he cleared the last step, though, he felt his balance shift, as if gravity had hiccupped for a moment. Jenny must have seen the shock on his face; she asked him what was wrong. He didn't answer; too busy turning to find that the staircase was gone, replaced by a blank stretch of wall.

Now that he was looking for it, the walls on this level were slightly different from those below, smoother with no imperfections or brushstrokes in the paint, as if they had been fashioned out of plastic. He put his hand out, touched the new section that blocked their escape route. It didn't feel like plastic; and there was that familiar vibration that wasn't quite a vibration, a hum just on the edge of hearing.

Jenny was babbling on, asking where the stairs were, what they were going to do. He only really noticed when she stopped. Curious, he turned to ask her why. She was staring over his shoulder in amazement.

The corridor, empty and featureless, stretched away in front of the them into the distance, much farther than it could have done and stayed within the building. Glancing behind them, he saw a blank wall only a few metres away. There was no doubt which way they were supposed to go.

'I'm sorry,' he said to Jenny. 'I appear to have underestimated the opposition.'

'This is a trap, isn't it? He knew we were there. Knew all along.'

'He must have done. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*!'

She frowned until she realised he was talking about himself. 'What can we do?'

He shook his head, banged the heel of his hand against the wall. 'Nothing. We're in his TARDIS - his ship. He's changed the architecture to keep us here, out of the way.'

'Is there no way to change it back?'

'Not without an access point, of course! Do you have a computer on you?'

She looked confused for a moment, then reached into her jacket and pulled out a notebook-sized device. 'Will this do?'

He snatched it from her, activated the LCD screen. 'Perfectly!' He pulled something from his pocket; it looked like a circuit board, but with rainbow trails of light running over it instead of metal tracks, and sat down cross-legged on the floor.

After a few minutes there was a rat's nest of wires running between the two devices. He looked up to check where Jenny was, a little bit along the corridor, not too far, and jabbed down with the stylus from her hand-held. The conglomeration came to life, buzzing slightly. It wouldn't last long, the connections weren't designed to carry this much power. Quickly he established contact with the advanced piece of technology in the lift and told it to forget about being secretive and just tell him everything it could.

There. A whole separate security system, far more advanced that anything this planet could have produced. Nano-cameras covering every inch of the building. He swore in Russian. He had been clearly visible from the moment he'd climbed through the window.

Quickly, he traced the system back to its connection with Jestocost's TARDIS and began his assault. It was Jestocost's turn to have underestimated him as he made short work of the electronic security and found himself in the TARDIS' main computer.

First things first, he thought as he looked up to find Jenny hovering over him. 'How's it going?' she asked.

'I'm trying to find a way to stop the satellites blowing up the planet. I thought that was a good candidate for top priority.'

'So is there? A way, I mean?'

'Well, I can try reprogramming them. Which might not work, and might not be finished in time even if it does.' He looked her in the eye. 'The countdown has started, they'll trigger in under an hour.'

'You better get started.'

'There's a better option. I dephase the antimatter storage in the ground station. Which will destroy the station and everything within about twenty miles, but without it the energy pulse will be harmless.'

'Where is this ground station?' she asked, but the look on her face told him she already knew.

He nodded. 'This building.'

'But it's in the middle of London! Millions of people live here!'

'And billions will die if I don't. Your entire race.'

'Don't make me out to be the bad guy here. This is your friend trying to blow up the world.'

'And I'm going to stop him.' He scribbled on the handheld's screen as Jenny watched in horror. 'There. It should take about twenty seconds.'

She just looked at him, mouth open.

'Oh, we'll be safe. We're in a TARDIS; nothing outside can touch us.'

'How... how can you just stand there?'

'What do you want me to do? Break down in tears? I just saved your planet.'

She turned and strode away down the corridor, shaking visibly with rage. He tutted. Humans were so emotional! He returned to the device. He still had a few seconds before...

He had just activated his final command when his makeshift circuitry exploded into red and green sparks. He dropped the melted mess to the floor and called after Jenny. She stopped, but didn't look round.

He jogged up to her. 'I really didn't have any choice.'

'You really don't care about those people?'

He shrugged. 'Of course I care. I would have saved them if I could; but...'

She swung around and her eyes blazed. 'No. You don't care about the people, do you? You care about the numbers. You'd have liked to save an extra million people, but you don't care 'cause you saved five billion. Well, why did you save them? Why?' He stood speechless. 'Do you care about me? Why didn't you kill me?'

'You looked like you were going to the same place; you had useful information.'

'You thought about it!'

He didn't have any reply to that.

'Why did you come here? Why did you save us?'

'I like this planet. The people, the food.'

'Because it's your holiday spot?' She was gathering her forces for another assault when the wall before them melted into a closed door. 'Ah,' the Doctor said. 'Here we are.' And before she had a chance to react, he opened it and stepped through.

The control room was smaller than his, cosier, and yet more elaborate. The walls were wood-panelled, and covered in impressionist paintings. Jenny came through the door behind him as Jestocost, hunched over the opposite side of the console, stood up and turned.

'Doctor,' he said, almost managing to hide the anger in his voice.

'Jestocost. In the flesh this time.' A worried look passed over his features. 'I hope.'

'Oh, this is me, Doctor. My old comrade.'

'Comrade?' Jenny asked.

Jestocost smiled. 'Oh yes, my dear. Didn't he tell you? We work for the same agency.'

'You work for them.'

'And you co operate with us when it suits your purposes.' He returned to addressing Jenny. 'He's saved your planet, I see, though at the cost of your city. I wonder, did he tell you how many planets he's killed himself?'

'That's enough,' the Doctor said, moving into the room. But suddenly a gun was in Jestocost's hand,

covering him.

'Doctor?'

He stayed silent, eyes darting about, looking for an opening.

'Yes, our friend here likes to call himself a hero. Likes to pretend he only kills bad people. Don't you, Doctor?'

More silence.

'When the truth is, he's just like me. The only difference is that I don't delude myself that I'm anything else.'

'I do what I have to do. Sometimes you have to compromise.'

'And that's what makes a hero, isn't it, Doctor? Compromise.' He swung the gun to cover Jenny, who was sidling away from the door. 'Don't even…'

And the Doctor was on him. Jenny watched as they grappled, the Doctor holding Jestocost's arm as he tried to bring his pistol to bear.

Eventually the Doctor slammed his opponent's wrist on the edge of the console, causing him to gasp in pain and drop the pistol. In one fluid motion the Doctor scooped it up off the floor and aimed it at Jestocost's chest.

'Now, Doctor… We've fought alongside each other. Remember?'

The Doctor shot him, the energy bullet vaporising the right side of his chest. His body fell to the floor and lay still.

Jenny cautiously came around the console and looked on as the Doctor turned Jestocost over with his foot. His face was obscured from a bright glow that seemed to come from within the skin, lights moving around within him. The Doctor calmly fired once more, obliterating his head, and the glow faded.

He turned to Jenny. 'Is there anywhere you can go?'

She nodded, face blank. 'My mother; she lives in Cambridge.'

He got the exact address from her; let his hands dance over the controls. The sound of the time ship's engines filled up the room, shocking her. It was only a few moments before he opened the doors and ushered her out, brushing away her questions as her pointed her up the driveway. He watched until she was safely inside, then turned back to the console and began to set the co ordinates for the middle of the crater, to reclaim his own ship.

Perhaps somewhere out there, there was a world where you didn't need to compromise, he mused; where you didn't need to become a monster to fight them, where you could hold onto the ideals that he'd started out with. It would be different from this one, of course: no Daleks, no Sontarans or Rutans, no CIA with their strategic interventions.

He decided he'd like to live in such a world.

To Catch a Fox

by Philip M Parneker

'Stand and deliver!'

The driver pulled hard on the reins as the horse leapt out in front of him, its masked rider firing his pistol into the air as the horse pulled back onto its hind legs.

As the carriage came to a halt, skidding on the ground, wet with the pounding rain, a furious, rotund face came to the window.

'What is the meaning of this?!' bellowed the face.

'This, my dear chap, is a hold up. Would you kindly get out of the carriage?'

The rider's voice was rough, but there was a haughtiness there. An oik who had bettered himself, perhaps?

The rider pointed his pistol at the driver. 'You: scram.'

The driver needed no further prompting, and he had disappeared into the dark forest that surrounded the road before the passenger had even opened his door. As the man stepped out, it became apparent that his rather large bulk had filled much of the carriage. Indeed, it was hard to see how the young girl who followed him had sat alongside him.

'You can take what you want,' said the man, offering his purse, 'but please let us go.'

'I'm afraid I won't be doing that,' replied the masked man, now dismounting his black steed. 'You have an appointment to keep with some friends of yours.'

The large man blanched visibly, looking around him furtively. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean this wasn't some random hold-up. I've been looking for you. And with the help of Babs here, I've finally found you.' The man was removing his mask now, to reveal a craggy, lined face with twinkling eyes, and a cheeky smile.

The big man turned to his companion, puzzlement etched on his face. 'You! You led me here, you whore!'

'Well, what else did you think I would come out on a night like this with you for?' replied Babs.

The man looked crestfallen. 'I thought... I don't know what I thought! I don't understand any of this! What on Earth is going on?'

'Ah, but that's the point, isn't it?' the craggy faced rider replied. 'Or rather, why on Earth?'

Realisation dawned on the man. 'So, you know.'

'Yes, we know. We know that you are not human, we know that you are a fugitive from your own race, the Fahdiddlyquaqua. A war criminal. A creature so unremittingly evil that I simply cannot allow you to remain on Earth in this time period.'

'So what now?'

'Well, I'm expecting some visitors about...' the night sky was lit at that moment by a brilliant blue light which fell from the sky between the trees onto the road in which they stood. '...now,' the man with the pistol finished.

A rich, deep voice boomed out across the forest. 'Torbor of the Fahdiddlyquaqua, you are accused of being a war criminal. Your deeds in the Tylum war lead to the deaths of millions of innocent lives, killed to satisfy your quest for purity in the Fahdiddlyquaqua race. For this you must now return to Fahdiddly to face trial. May I remind you that resisting arrest for this crime may lead to summary execution. Step into the light, or be obliterated on the spot.'

The large man, the Fahdiddlyquaqua, turned and glowered at the man and woman. 'I'll survive this, mark my words. I'll escape again, and when I do I'll track you down. Vengeance will be mine!'

And with that, the man stepped into the light, and in the blink of an eye, both he and the blue beam were gone.

The man brushed his hands together. 'Another job done.'

'You were magnificent, Doctor!' said Babs, hugging him.

The Doctor's eye's boggled. 'Careful, love, you'll crush me with that chest of yours!'

'Oh, you are one!' giggled Babs.

The Doctor's reply was interrupted by an urgent bleeping sound, coming from the Doctor's pocket. The Doctor reached in and pulled out a small, green device, glowing with each beep it emitted.

'It's the Brigadier! He must be in trouble.'

Babs turned to the Doctor. 'It's a shame we have to go,' she said, 'I must say, you do look the part. A right Dick Turpin.'

'Never let it be said that my Dick is anything les than impressive,' replied the Doctor with a smile. 'Come on, let's see what the Brigadier wants us for.'

As the Doctor and Babs entered the Brigadier's office, an apparently empty room greeted them. They were about turn around and leave when they heard a high pitch squeal from behind the desk. Exchanging a glance with Babs, the Doctor coughed loudly.

The rather rotund form of Corporal Bell shot up from behind the desk, smoothing down her crumpled and ill-fitting uniform, red faced at the sight of the newcomers.

'I...er...um...' she said, and dashed from the room. The Doctor gave a hearty chuckle as the Brigadier pulled himself up from behind the same desk, his tie askew and his shirt undocked.

'You could learn to knock, Doctor,' he bellowed, his nostrils flared even more than usual.

'You old dog, Brigadier. I didn't know you had it in you!' The Doctor's craggy face looked like it had been in the bath too long, creased even further by the broad grin on his face.

'Hattie... Corporal Bell merely had something in her eye. I offered to get it out for her,' the Brigadier spluttered.

'I bet you did!' cried Babs, her previous professional demeanour in front of her superior finally cracking.

'Miss Babs!' the Brigadier replied, a little crossly, 'May I remind you that you are still a member of UNIT, even if you are permanently attached to the Doctor here.'

'Yes sir. Sorry sir.' Babs tried to keep a straight face.

'So why have you called me back, Brigadier? Evil maggots? Lizard men? Murderous manikins?'

'The Master,' the Brigadier replied.

'Oh, not him again! Does he never give up?'

'It seems not. Had him in our top security prison, too. Managed to hypnotise the Governor, arrange an invasion by some prehistoric fishmen and invent some kind of device that fed on people's fears. Kept us tied up while he slipped out the back door. Quite why they built a back door in the prison, I'll never know. Anyway, he's free now, and up to his old tricks. Thing is, this time he's asking for you.'

'How do you mean?'

'Keep's calling UNIT HQ, asking if you're back yet. I think he's getting impatient. Seems he has something he wants to tell you.'

'Isn't UNIT HQ's number top secret?' Babs asked.

'Well, it was meant to be, but they went and put it in the phone book, didn't they? Had the cheek to charge us to change it, too! Well, with UNIT being strapped for cash we...'

'Yes, yes, Brigadier, but what did he want?' the Doctor asked impatiently.

'Wouldn't say. He would only talk to you. Had some pretty nifty technology blocking his call, but we managed to get round that. We've pinpointed his location to a tower block in Peckham.' The Brigadier handed the Doctor a piece of paper.

'Leave him to me, Brigadier. The Master and I go way back.'

The Brigadier nodded. 'Be careful out there, Doctor. Call me if you need backup.'

The Doctor held the door open for Babs, ushering her out. 'Will do. Oh, and Brigadier...'

'What?'

'Your moustache is slipping.'

The Doctor closed the door behind him.

The building was like a monster; a huge grey beast towering over its prey, windows like a thousand eyes looking down on them, the double doors at its entrance a gaping mouth, ready to devour them. Babs instinctively pulled back as they approached.

The Doctor looked at her, a puzzled look on his face. 'It's only a building. What the matter with you?'

Babs hugged herself tightly. 'Can't you feel it Doctor?'

His craggy face screwed up into a frown, the lines of his face folding into deep crevices. 'Feel what?'

'The evil. The whole building feels like it's made from pure evil,' Babs took another step back, 'I can't go in there.'

'Don't be daft,' said the Doctor, chuckling slightly, 'it's just a building you silly moo.'

Babs bristled at that. 'I am not a silly moo, Doctor!'

'So you're coming in then? Good.'

The Doctor marched off toward the building, leaving Babs little choice but to follow.

'Fourth floor,' said the Doctor, consulting his time-disruption device, which was giving off a steady ping-ping noise that increased when the Doctor pointed it toward the ceiling.

'Doctor, this place is deserted,' pointed out Babs, as she followed the Doctor up the first flight of stairs, 'but some of this graffiti is fresh. What happened to the people?'

'What indeed,' the Doctor replied over his shoulder, 'hopefully we'll find some answers on the fourth floor.'

They reached the fourth floor, the Doctor's device going wild, pinging rapidly and increasing as they made their way along the balcony until they reached the door to flat 57.

'This is the one,' the Doctor indicated, retrieving his sonic screwdriver from his pocket.

As he did so, the pinging device reached a crescendo, the 'ping' so high-pitched that Babs had to cover her ears. Finally, the device could take no more. It exploded in a shower of sparks.

'It must have overloaded,' said the Doctor, looking glumly down at the remains of the device on the floor. 'That was my best one, too.'

The reason for the overload became apparent as soon as they entered the flat. Amid the clutter, the take-away cartons, empty larger cans and unwashed plates of a typical bachelor pad, stood a familiar six-sided console, its gleaming white panels standing out against the purple wallpaper of the flat. Installed in one wall was the screen of a scanner.

'It's your TARDIS!'

'Not mine, the Master's. It looks to me like he's stuck here on Earth. No wonder he's playing games with us - he must be bored out of his furry skull.'

'So he's trying to fix the console?'

'It looks like he's given up on that. Look at this,' the Doctor indicated a cable running from the console to the black and white TV that sat in the corner of the room. On its screen were two white blocks, one on each side of the screen. Bouncing between them was a small white dot.

'Pong!' exclaimed Babs.

'It's little wonder with all this rotting food around,' said the Doctor, breaking into one of his cheeky grins. 'Come on, let's see what clues we can find.'

The flat turned out to be disappointingly ordinary. Well, besides the Gallifreyan technology dotted around the place. Aside from an alarming moment when the Doctor tried to set free the contents of a lava lamp, convinced it was a Egalitritian from the planet Galmar, the only item of interest they found was something the Doctor long-windedly called a 'Protective Illusionary Security System - Optical Fear Factor' device. A small black box that the Master had plugged into the console.

'This little device is probably the explanation for your sense of foreboding when we approached the building,' the Doctor explained, 'and the reason why this entire building is deserted.'

'Why, what does it do?' asked Babs.

'It instils fear in the hearts of men. And women, come to that. No one will come near this place, and the residents who already lived there would have asked to be moved. The council must have

been sympathetic. There's something almost tangible about the sense of evil here. Mind you, I'm only guessing; it doesn't actually bother me that much.'

'No, you're right, that's exactly how I feel. Oh, come on Doctor, let's get out of here before this place really freaks me out,' Babs pleaded.

The Doctor nodded. 'I think you're right; there's nothing else to be gained from staying here. I'll just disconnect the...'

As the Doctor's hand reached out to the plug that fed the TARDIS console with electricity from the mains, a bolt of energy shot from the plug, striking him in the chest, and throwing him across the room.

'Doctor!' cried Babs.

The Doctor was lying on the floor, groaning, but he was conscious. Babs signed with relief. The relief didn't last long though; with a sudden slam, the door to the flat swung shut. Babs tried the door, but it was locked firm.

'We're trapped!' yelled Babs.

'Stop panicking and find the door controls, you silly old trout,' said the Doctor weakly from the floor.

Babs was about to do as she'd been told when the scanner suddenly began to open - to reveal the grinning, malevolent face of the Master.

'So I see you've found my place. Nice of you to drop by. Sorry I couldn't be there myself, but you know how it is. Still, make yourself at home.'

'So, it was a trap,' muttered the Doctor, still lying on the floor. 'I should have realised it was far to easy to walk in here.'

'My dear Doctor, you're so wonderfully predictable.' The Master said in his cultured tones.

'Well, I must say, you certainly foxed me this time,' said the Doctor, attempting one of his trademarked guttural laughs, but only managing a faint chuckle.

The Master was obviously annoyed. 'Be careful, Doctor. You know that's still a touchy subject. And it won't do to make me touchy when I have you at my mercy.' The Master was waving his bushy tail, an instinctive reaction whenever he was riled.

'You still haven't told me how it happened, Master,' the Doctor replied.

'It was your fault, Doctor. You left me to die on that desolate, dying planet after defeating my last plan for universal domination. But that planet wasn't as dead as you thought. Its inhabitants found me, nursed me back to health. In return I gave them power and knowledge they had never dreamed of.'

'But there was a price for your survival, wasn't there Master?' the Doctor pressed. His voice was growing stronger.

The Master grinned, revealing sharp teeth. 'I prefer to think of it as an added bonus. The planet began to change me, make me one of its own. It gave me this powerful new form.'

'Powerful?' The Doctor was incredulous. 'You're only twelve inches high!'

'Nevertheless, Doctor, it is you who cower before me!'

While the Doctor and his nemesis talked, Babs was franticly pushing buttons and pulling levers, hoping to find the controls for the door. Or, failing that, she would settle for closing the scanner to avoid having to look at the evil, long snouted face of the Master. The controls were different to those of the Doctor's TARDIS, and it took her a while to realise why - they were designed for the small, furry hands of the Master.

Eventually she found a lever, right at the top of the console, near the central rotor. The Master had crudely written 'DOORS' next to it in felt-tip pen. 'I've found it Doctor!' she said as she leaned over the console to pull the lever.

The Doctor was groggily getting to his feet. 'Careful Babs, it might be...'

As Babs pulled the lever, two panels in the console opened below the lever, and out shot two clamp-like devices that immediately grabbed Babs by the chest, pulling her down.

'...booby trapped,' finished the Doctor.

Shaking his head to clear the last of the haziness, the Doctor leapt forward and tried to pull Babs free of the console. She was stuck fast. The Doctor rolled his eyes. 'What did you go and do that

you silly bint?'
'Help Doctor!' screamed Babs, 'Get me free!'
'I'm trying! The Doctor shouted back, 'But I'm afraid it's got too strong a grip. And let's face it, e's a lot to get hold of!'
On the screen the furry form of the Master was in hysterics, throwing his head back with ghter.
'Let her go, Master, or I swear I'll have you stuffed!' The Doctor shouted at the screen.
'You'll have to find me first,' the Master grinned back, 'but I've been a sport - I've left a clue that uld help you. If you survive of course!'
'What do you mean?'
The Master simply threw his head back and gave a long, repetitive laugh, before looking right at Doctor. 'Boom boom!' he said. The screen went black, then lit up with a countdown. They had two nutes.
The Doctor turned back to Babs. 'We've got to get out of here!'
'I quite agree Doctor, but unfortunately this console has other ideas.'
'I'll have to disconnect the power, there's nothing for it.'
'But another shock like that could kill you next time!'
'I'll have to take that chance,' the Doctor replied, 'I'll be ready for it this time. There are things a he Lord can do to shield himself against this sort of thing.'
'Then do it. Get me free before this place blows sky high!'
The Doctor steeled himself, felt the power of his Time Lords curse through him, as he reached t to remove the plug from the wall socket. As his hand neared the plug, the electricity arced out ross the space between them. After the initial jolt, the Doctor managed to steady himself, feeling e energy flowing through him as the powers that he had learnt to control under the tutelage of an d and mysterious Time Lord on his home planet of Gallifrey fought against all that the electricity ard could throw at him.
Slowly but surely the Doctor's hand edged nearer and nearer the plug, until finally his fingers uld grasp it and pull it from the socket. Immediately the clamps holding Babs released their grip, d she pulled herself up from the console, rubbing her sore chest.
The Doctor was lying on the floor, eyes closed, body still. Fearing the worst, Babs ran to his side d placed her head to his chest. Hearts still beating. Phew.
She slapped him twice about the face and his eyes snapped open. 'Thank you,' he said.
'Thank you Doctor. How did you do that?'
The Doctor looked at the timer; they had forty seconds left. 'I'll explain later,' he said, pulling mself to the floor and taking Bab's hand. 'I'm hoping that with the power off... aha!' The door vung open and they raced into the corridor. Babs' made for the lift, put the Doctor pulled her ack. 'We'd stand a better chance on foot if the bomb goes off.'
As they charged down the stairs, Babs pointed out that they were no closer to finding the Master an they had been before visiting this place. As they pushed open the doors at the entrance the Doctor old her that on the contrary, they had learned something very important. As they ran across the car ark in front of the building Babs' asked him just what exactly they had learnt. As they threw themselves the floor, the building behind them exploded in a huge fireball that sent masonry up into the air and nto the surrounding wasteland. As the Doctor and Babs picked themselves up, the Doctor explained.
'The Master works for the council.'
'How do you figure that one out?'
'How else would he have got planning permission for that?' he said, pointing to the statue.
How Babs had missed it, she would never know, but there, towering above them, was a golden catue of a forty-foot high, sharp snouted, bushy tailed fox.

he council offices were a marvel of Sixties architecture; square and functional. Characterless.
The foyer was not much better. One or two sorry looking pot plants had been placed next to the

The Doctor and Babs walked up to the high counter, evidently designed to keep the staff as far away from the riff-raff as possible. The Doctor rang the bell. Even that sounded dull.

After some considerable time, a woman sauntered unhurriedly into reception, a bored, totally disinterested look on her pockmarked face. She was chewing gum, an act that made her seem even less interested in actually doing her job than she actually was. Which was no mean feat.

'Yeah?' she asked in a voice that matched her expression.

'I'd like to see Mr. Masters please,' the Doctor asked politely.

'Well, ya can't, 'es in a meetin'.'

'It is very urgent,' the Doctor insisted.

'Sorry,' replied the woman, in a tone that suggested she was anything but.

'Tell me, have you noticed anything about Mr. Masters? Anything odd?' The Doctor asked.

'Waddaya mean?' the woman replied, chomping on her gum.

'Well, for instance, have you noticed that he's a twelve-foot high fox who walks on his hind legs and talks?'

'The council are all for this equal opportunities stuff, ain't they? Mr. Masters can't 'elp bein' 'ow 'e was born, can 'e?' replied the woman.

'No no, of course. I just wanted to make sure I had the right Mr. Masters.'

'Come on Doctor, we're wasting our time here,' said Babs.

'You're the Doctor?' asked the woman.

'The very same. You've heard of me perhaps? I am rather famous for my acts of bravery. You've heard tales of my derring do?'

'I'm not interested in your derring do, fank you very much,' the woman opened a drawer, taking out a small envelope. 'Na, 'e left a note for ya. Said ya might be comin' in.'

The Doctor took the envelope and opened it straight away. The letter inside was written in immaculate script.

My dear Doctor,

I'm so glad to see that you escaped from my little trap at the flat. It would have been so... disappointing had you been defeated so easily. Not in the spirit of the game. And that's exactly what this is, isn't it? A game. I think it's time we admit that, because once we do we can start to play properly. And I know you want to play, don't you? Well, just in case you don't, how's about a little incentive. Let's say I'll, oh, I don't know, release a Chronovore into Earth's dimension to see what happens. Don't like that? How's about I use my brainwave modulator to turn the world's domestic animals on their human keepers? Killer sheep, murderous cows, you get the picture. I haven't decided yet, but rest assured that whatever I do it will be very very evil.

So, I advise you, dear Doctor, to read this very carefully. It contains a clue to my current whereabouts, if you're clever enough to work it out:

My first is in cards, but not in deal
My second is in ball, but not in wheel
My third is in spin, but not in turn
My fourth is in arrive, but not return
My fifth is in money, but not in cash
My sixth is in roulette, but not in splash

Good luck, Doctor! Hahaaahaaaahaaaahaaaa.... Boom boom!

'The fiend!' Shouted the Doctor, 'He knows how much I hate riddles!'

'It's not difficult, Doctor,' replied Babs, 'a bit too easy, if you ask me.'

'Oh, it's easy enough,' the Doctor glared at her, 'but look at those rhymes! Some of them don' even make sense as clues! Splash? What does that mean? Only a truly evil mind could devise suc a cruel puzzle.'

The entrance to the casino was guarded by a mean looking bouncer who had taken one look at the Doctor's rather eccentric get up and decided from the off that he wasn't getting in.

The Doctor tried to appeal to the large, skinheaded man's sense of civic duty.

'You don't understand! An evil mastermind is threatening to destroy the universe! It's imperative that I am allowed into the building!'

The man starred impassively ahead. The Doctor turned to Babs.

'I was hoping to avoid this, but I'm going to have to hypnotise him. Stand back.'

Babs did so, and the Doctor produced a pocket watch on a gold fob, which he proceeded to dangle in front of the bouncer's eyes. The impassive look on the man's face didn't change, and his lack of movement indicated that the Doctor's plan was working.

Until, that was, the bouncer reached out and grabbed the watch, crushing it in his fist, and throwing its mangled remains at the Doctor.

'Now get lost,' the man said, 'before I do the same to you.'

The Doctor and Babs made a hasty retreat.

They sat on a park bench, watching an old man taking pictures of the ducks in the lake. The Doctor's face was glum.

'Innit marvellous,' he said, 'fallen at the second hurdle. If we don't get into that casino the Master will do something incredibly evil.'

'Why can't we just use the TARDIS?' Asked Babs.

'That would be cheating!' The Doctor replied, 'and besides, the old girl's not very good at those short hops. Last time I tried it I ended up in a different dimension.'

'You didn't tell me about that!'

'Didn't I? It must have been before your time.'

'So what was it like, this different dimension?'

'Horrible. Imagine a world where there is no laughter, where plans never go wrong with hilarious consequences. It felt so unreal. Wrong.' The Doctor's eyes were staring, unfocused, into the distance as his mind drifted back.'

'It sounds awful! What happened?'

'Absolutely nothing. It was as if the people had lost the plot. Or worse, there was no plot. People were so... directionless. Pointless. I tracked down some familiar faces while I was there; Lizzy, my previous companion was a barmaid in a tatty little pub, Bernard Benton was a used car salesman, and the Brigadier was a maths teacher at a public school - can you imagine!'

Babs chuckled. She could just see the Brig putting up with a load of snotty nosed little oiks. 'And they didn't recognise you?'

'Oh no, they recognised me alright. As someone who should be dead. Heart attack, apparently.' The Doctor's face was pale, as he recalled the event.

'What's that?'

'I don't know. I've never heard of it. It's certainly not something that happens in this world.'

'Thank goodness!'

The Doctor nodded. 'Life was just so humdrum. The only excitement people got was from something called "teevee"'

'What was that?'

'A little box that sat in the corner of every living room, spewing out 'entertainment' in the form of stories about people with slightly less humdrum lives than those watching them.'

'But when would they have time to watch this stuff? Surely all the alien invasions and criminal master plans kept them busy?'

'There were no alien invasions or criminal master plans. Where's the fun in that?'

'I couldn't live like that, with no fun.'

'Neither could I,' the Doctor replied, turning to the camera. 'Could you?'

The old man behind the camera who was snapping away, taking pictures of the ducks, shook his head. 'It sounds like no life at all.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Exactly. I got away in the end, made it back to this world of reality, where

everyone knows their role, has their part to play, the direction they are going. I hope I never leave it again.'

'Well, we can't sit around here all day, feeling sorry for ourselves,' Babs replied, 'come on Doctor, jump to it.'

The Doctor leapt to his feet. 'Of course! Babs, you're a genius!'

'I am?'

'Absolutely! The roof of the casino is only a few feet higher than the roof of the ah... gentleman's club next door. Now I happen to be very well acquainted with the proprietor of said establishment who I'm sure could be persuaded that his roof might need a hitherto unwarranted inspection.'

'You might have warned me, Doctor. How am I meant to climb in these high heels?'

As expected, the owner of the club was only too willing to let the Doctor, who she described as 'one of her best customers' onto the roof with Babs, who, for her part, was wondering why there were so many women in a gentleman's club. Must be ladies night, she guessed.

The gap between the buildings was very small, but the climb once across was steep, with no footholds. The Doctor, as always, had a plan. Disappearing back into the club, he returned with a rather long and viscous looking whip. Babs figured it must have been used in some kind of ceremony or something. They did that, didn't they, gentleman's clubs? Or was that the Masons?

Brandishing the whip with ease, the Doctor threw it back and cast it like a fishing rod towards one of the casino's turrets across the gap, where it wrapped itself around the protrudence and pulled itself tight like a rope.

The Doctor climbed up first, fixing the rope more securely when he reached the turret. He then beckoned Babs across.

'I'm not exactly built for this kind of thing, Doctor!' She wailed.

'Don't worry, it's perfectly safe.'

'How many times have I heard that before!?'

'Well, I'm usually right,' the Doctor replied. 'Nine times out of ten.'

'Well, I've lost count, so here goes.' So saying, Babs gripped the whip-come-rope and began to haul herself upwards.

The Doctor's sonic screwdriver made short work of the relatively primitive electronic lock of the manager's office, and the door slid open with a 'shhtuck'.

As the Doctor and Babs slipped inside, a scene from a horror movie confronted them. Hanging from a coat hanger over the manager's desk, was the skin of a man. Slack and wrinkled, eye-sockets empty, it hung like a ghoul. Babs gasped, then gathered her wits as she noticed the clothes that hung loosely from the body. 'Doctor, that's...'

She was interrupted by a screech from behind the desk.

'I sincerely hope that's Corporal Bell again,' said the Doctor.

But the being that emerged from behind the desk was considerably smaller, and just a little hairier that Corporal Bell. As the Master rose to his full height, Babs strained to see his legs, but they were hidden, as always, behind the desk.

'So, you found me,' said the Master in his cultured tones.

'Well, I'd certainly say that we've found the mastermind behind this charade,' replied the Doctor.

'As, I say, Doctor, you've found me.'

'Oh, Master, can't you see you're being used!' the Doctor was edging nearer to the desk as he spoke, 'you're as much a pawn in this game as I am. You're just a puppet!'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' the Master replied, his voice wavering, 'now get back before I have to use this.' He pulled a small, black wand from an invisible pocket and waved it menacingly at the Doctor.

'Izzy wizzy, let's get busy,' said the Doctor, 'wrong show. Wrong puppet!'

As he said this, the Doctor leapt forward, ignoring the much squealing and waving of wand from the Master, and grabbed the furry Time Lord's head, and pulled hard. The Master's body came clean away, to reveal a small, slimy green hand waving nakedly from beneath the desk.

'I think you should come out now,' said the Doctor, throwing the now lifeless puppet Master into a nearby bin.

Gingerly, the being behind the desk stood up. It was tall and spindly, with a narrow face that was almost entirely filled with large, saucer-like eyes.

'What is it?' asked Babs, her eyes wide with horror.

'That, my dear Babs,' replied the Doctor, 'is the true form of our old friend the Fahdiddlyquaqua.'

'That explains the human suit!' cried Babs. 'I recognised it when we came in. It was that old duffer Sir Messingham.'

'I've waited two hundred years for this moment,' said the alien, 'two hundred years of mind-numbing boredom, locked up in that prison cell. All thanks to you. The long life of my race has been both a curse and a blessing; a curse because I had to live so long in captivity, but a blessing because now, finally, I can exact my revenge on you and your whore, Doctor!'

'Stop calling me that!' yelled Babs.

'So,' said the Doctor, laying a placating hand on Babs shoulder, 'now you've got us here, what do you plan to do with us?'

'I'm going to kill you. Slowly.'

'How unimaginative. I had hoped for something better from the mind of an intergalactic war criminal.'

'It will suffice. Just to see you die will be pleasurable enough.' The Fahdiddlyquaqua opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out a gun and handcuffs. 'Now, on your knees and turn around.' The Doctor and Babs did as they were told, and the alien roughly handcuffed their hands behind their backs, placing his gun on the desk as he did so. 'You will die on your knees, Doctor. A position I'm sure your companion is all too familiar with.'

'One more crack like that and...' began Babs.

'You'll what? Cry? You're at my mercy now, girl!'

'How do you imagine that you'll get away with this? UNIT are on their way, you'll never get passed them,' the Doctor pointed out.

'I think you'll find they're not, you know,' replied the alien.

'What do you mean?'

'I've kept them rather busy with some plastic loving friends of mine,' the Fahdiddlyquaqua said with glee.

'You don't mean...'

'Yes! I've arranged a Tupperware party! You know the Brigadier and his men can't get enough of those little plastic tubs.'

'You evil swine! You know the UNIT budget won't run to Tupperware! You'll cripple them!'

'That's the idea, Doctor. Then this world will be defenceless!'

'Hang on, I thought your vendetta was with me?' the Doctor said, a puzzled frown on his face.

'Oh, it is, mainly. But I thought, hey; why not take over the world while I'm at it? It's what we aliens do, you know.'

'I do have one question, before I die,' the Doctor said.

'And what's that?' the alien's interest was piqued.

'Why pose as the Master?'

'To get your attention. For UNIT to take me seriously enough to call you back to this time period. When I heard the Master has escaped from his prison, I used his persona. It worked, didn't it?'

'I must admit, that you had me fooled for a while,' replied the Doctor, 'but there's one thing I should tell you before I go.'

'And what's that?'

'You'll have to come a little closer. It's a secret.'

The alien moved closer.

'It's about Miss Babs,' the Doctor whispered.

'Your whore? Go on.'

'She has a rather special skill.'

'I bet she does! And what is it?'

'Escapology.' the Doctor said, a smile breaking out over his gnarled face.

The alien spun around to find Babs standing next to the desk, his gun in her hand.

The Doctor stood up behind him. 'And I'm not bad at it either,' he said, holding up his free hands, 'studied under Houdini, you know.' He threw the cuffs to the Fahdiddlyquaqua. 'Put them on,' he said, 'and we'll take a trip to UNIT headquarters. I'm sure we'll be welcome at the party. And afterwards I expect they'll find you a nice new cell to spend the next few centuries.'

'Noooooooooooo!' cried the alien.

'...and when I turned round, they were all wearing false moustaches!' The crowd erupted with laughter as the Brigadier completed his monologue.

'Oh, Brigadier, no matter how many times I hear that, it still makes me laugh!' cried Babs.

They were celebrating the capture of the Fahdiddlyquaqua, now safely ensconced in a top security prison (although not the same one as the Master has been held in) and out of harms way. Babs looked around at the sausage rolls and pineapple on sticks, all held in little Tupperware pots that covered the table in the mess room. However would they eat all that? Then she remembered the gentle giant that was Bernard Benton and realised it wouldn't be a problem.

'It's a good job the Ministry approved further funding for UNIT,' said the Doctor, munching on an egg roll.

'Oh, yes,' replied the Brigadier, 'we would have been in serious trouble if aliens had decided to invade. We'd have had nothing to defend ourselves with besides ten ton of little Tupperware tubs!'

Corporal Bell came into the room carrying two more enormous plates of sandwiches.

'Careful with that, Hattie,' called Babs, 'those look heavy to me.'

'Nothing I can't handle,' replied Bell, and promptly fell flat on her face, the large heavy plates landing on her head. Matron was called, and she arrived, full of concern. She seemed, relieved, however, when she saw it was Corporal Bell lying on the floor. 'She'll be all right,' she said, dismissively, turning her attention to the Brigadier, 'for one nasty moment I thought something had happened to you.' And she pinched his bum.

The Brigadier blushed. 'Ooooh, Matron!'

And they all laughed.

As the medics carried the considerable bulk of Corporal Bell along the corridor towards the infirmary, they were surprised when she sat up on the stretcher and ushered them away.

'I'm quite all right,' she insisted, ignoring their protests, 'I'll just go for a lie down in my quarters.'

As the medics reluctantly left her, Bell sighed a deep sigh, and began to pull at the skin at the back of her neck. With one hard tug, she pulled the human skin from her body to reveal the green skinned alien inside.

'So, I mean nothing to him, do I? Prefer that whore of a Matron does he? Well, we'll see about that. Vengeance will be mine!'

RHUDEN2001

The Courage of My Convictions

by James Potter

A

The strange man arrived on the Tuesday, without giving any details about himself. But that was fine by Caite; anyone could visit Merema, if they felt they wanted to. After all, that was the whole point. If someone wanted to get away from it all, wanted to escape the inhuman technology of the universe, escape the breathless pursuit of everyday life, then Merema was the place to come.

Caite had looked after the house since its last owner had died. She had visited for the same reason as everyone else - to get away, take time out. The owner was an ill old man, and listening to everyone else's problems had taken its toll. He had bequeathed the house to her, as his dying wish, saying that she could listen, and he considered that the greatest gift.

Caite had been uncertain at first, not knowing what she should do. But the house taught her everything she needed to know and soon she found herself filling the old man's shoes. People would come to Merema, stay at the house as long as they liked, and when they felt ready to face reality again, they would go. And Caite would just keep them company, and listen to their tales. It made them feel better, and they left a happier person.

Naturally, Caite felt affection and sympathy towards those who visited, and was pleased to call them friends by the time they left. And her disappointment at them having to leave was always offset by the knowledge that someone else was just around the corner.

There were times when lots of people came, and others when only one at a time would visit. When the strange man arrived, Caite had been living in the house for twelve years, and no one had visited for two months.

He did not talk to her at first, apart from to arrange a room. He spent the nights alone, not even coming out for supper, and spent the days either sitting on the rocking chair in the porch, or walking the fields under the twin suns. When he sat in the porch he would rock himself gently backwards and forwards, his gaze drifting between the sky, his feet and his blue box that sat on the dusty drive at the front of the house.

For the first couple of days he did no more than that. He was an enigma, but Caite was patient - she knew that when he wanted to talk, he would.

He first spoke to her on the third evening. She was sitting in the porch, watching the two suns race each other to the horizon. He had retired to his room a few hours before, but came out and watched the suns set. He leant against the wooden railing, gazing at the golden light with a curious happy/sad smile. Caite found her eyes drifting away from the dying rays, and falling on him.

He was middle-aged, just creeping into his fifties, but his face was smooth and hardly creased. Cherubic almost. He was still wearing the clothes he had arrived in: the emerald jacket and trousers, and the gold waistcoat. His surprisingly grey hair was long and curled round his neck, his fringe steering clear of his eyes. A short scarf lay across his shoulders, more for effect than warmth.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I haven't been exactly sociable recently."

Caite smiled, pleased that he was now ready to talk.

"That's all right," she told him, "People come here to get away. Some find it easier to get away completely, some want the company."

"I wasn't sure..." the man began. He sighed. "I'm still not."

"What's your name?"

The man chuckled. "Now that's a tricky one," he said, "It's probably best if I give you the name I give everyone else. I'm known as the Doctor."

She inclined her head. "Caite."

The suns finally set, darkness fell. The stars came out, and shone. The Doctor looked up at them.

"Nice planet you have."

Caite got up and stood next to him. She looked up also. "It's not just mine. Everybody's welcome to Merema."

"I certainly feel welcome. I felt welcome as soon as I entered the house."

Caite turned and smiled at the building behind them, gazing happily at its wooden beams and walls. "I know, it likes people."

The Doctor followed her gaze, then looked at his blue box on the drive. "Yes, they usually do."

Caite turned back to the Doctor. "And what do you usually do, when you're not being unsociable?"

The Doctor sighed again, and stared out across the fields. "Well, until recently I saved planets."

Caite raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yes, I've spent most of my life protecting people from various evils in the universe, a good two thousand years or so."

"I see."

The Doctor pointed up at the stars. "Up there, somewhere," he said quietly, "in another time, another place, there's a war being waged. A war that spreads over most of this galaxy, and threatens to destroy the entire universe."

Caite hopped onto the railing and perched on it, her back to the fields, her eyes studying her new friend. There was something sad about him, and he seemed to be wanting something. But he didn't know what it was himself.

"That's quite a claim," she whispered, not really sure why her voice had dropped.

The Doctor looked down at his hands. They were gripping the beam, the knuckles bright white.

"It's all true," he told her. He shook his head, annoyed, and started to pace the porch. "There's an evil that knows no morality, no mercy. It passes through civilisation after civilisation, devouring everything it touches, draining the life out of every living thing." He stopped pacing and looked up, his eyes wide. "It destroyed my home."

Caite slipped down from the rail and went to him. She stood close, wanting to comfort him, but not sure if she could. He seemed so upset, so... frustrated.

She was shocked when the Doctor gripped her shoulders, the movement was so sudden.

"We're on a knife's edge." The sense of urgency in his voice was tangible. "There's little left we can do, we've fought them for millennia, they've stolen our technology and defeated us on planet after planet. We have no advantage left, and yet we're all that stands between them and the universe."

Caite could hear panic in the man's voice, it rose as he spoke.

"I couldn't stand it any more," he continued, "I had to get away. All those people, relying on me for something to turn the tide, something to win. Waiting for me to pull a rabbit from my hat but there's nothing there."

"Ssh, it's all right, it's okay," Caite murmured and placed her hands on his.

"There's nothing I can do, not this time." The Doctor sunk his face into Caite's shoulder. "End of the line."

Caite ran a hand through his hair. "It's okay, they can't get you here, you can stay here as long as you want, it's all right."

The Doctor pulled away and looked her in the face. He had been weeping. "Do you mean that?"

Caite was overcome with a mess of emotions. Her face crumpled as she saw the mixture of fear and relief in his eyes. Such old, tired eyes.

"Who did this to you?" she whispered.

The effect was like a slap in the face. The Doctor withdrew, turning away from Caite, and retreated inside. She moved to follow, but stopped when she heard his footsteps hurrying up the stairs. She paused at the door and looked at the Doctor's blue box. It sat in the encroaching darkness, a silent enigma.

"What happened?" she asked, but the box didn't reply. Sighing, Caite went inside.

By morning, the blue box was not alone.

The Doctor said nothing at breakfast apart from to thank Caite for cooking it. He went outside afterwards. Rather than follow, Caite decided to watch him from one of the bedroom windows.

The room that she chose looked out over the porch - she hoped it wouldn't occur to the Doctor to look up. But when she opened the window, she saw something had already attracted his attention.

He was standing in the porch, staring at the object that stood on the ground next to his blue box. It was a tall white dome, functional and featureless, the glaring sunlight reflected off it like ceramic.

The Doctor stepped off the porch and approached the dome. As he did so, another man appeared from round the far side of the blue box.

"Such lovely weather we're having," the newcomer called. The Doctor stopped for a beat, then turned to face him.

The newcomer was a little older than the Doctor, his hair was still black, but greying. Everything about him was dark, from his tails and velvet waistcoat to the pointed beard on his face. There was even a darkness in his voice, a hint of something feline in his eyes.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" the Doctor demanded, sounding more annoyed than his polite demeanour suggested.

The newcomer walked towards him, but Caite didn't see the Doctor move away at all. They obviously knew each other, but what sort of relationship they had was hard to fathom.

"The President wishes you to return to Control."

"I can't go back," the Doctor told him, "Don't you understand? There's nothing more I can do, it's simply a case of probability. We have a month at most but the end result is inevitable."

"Not necessarily." The Doctor became alert, something in his posture tensed. "There has been a breakthrough."

"What sort of breakthrough?"

"New information." The newcomer held up a small shining disc. "It's all on here - the one weapon left that could defeat the enemy."

The Doctor walked past the other man and leant against his blue box. "So why come and disturb me?"

"The weapon is stored on an alien planet. You're the only one with enough off-world experience."

"Why can't you do it?"

The dark man spread his arms apologetically. "I'm needed at Control. The enemy have been monitoring the space-time vortex. As soon as they see you moving they'll be after you. We'll be co-ordinating a perimeter defence to give you enough time to reach the weapon."

The Doctor said nothing, just stared at the ground.

"You must obey the order," the newcomer told him, "It is your duty as a Time Lord."

The Doctor fished something out of his waistcoat pocket. Caite was too far away to see clearly, but it looked like a key of some sort. It resembled her key to the house.

He swung the key on its chain, back and forth. He then looked up and looked around, taking in the golden fields and hills. Caite shrunk back from the window, hoping he hadn't seen her. Finally, the Doctor looked at the other man.

"For the memory of Gallifrey." His voice betrayed no emotion, save a final determination.

The man nodded and stepped towards the white dome.

Realising what was happening, Caite rushed out of the room and downstairs.

"Stop!" she shouted as she ran out the porch. The Doctor was opening the door to his blue box. The other man was opening a door in the white dome. The Doctor stopped what he was doing and, with a glance at the other man, walked across to greet her.

"Are you sure you want to go back, after everything that's happened to you?" The words tumbled out of Caite's mouth quicker than she could think them. "After everything they've done to you?"

The Doctor placed his hands on her shoulders but it wasn't the grip of a man who had lost control,

"Caite," he said, whispering the words close to her ear, "I have to do this. There isn't any getting away from it. There's no running away. It's what I have to do. Whether I live or die it's what I have to do."

Caite hugged him, and he hugged her back. "You look after yourself then."

"Oh I intend to," the Doctor replied with a smile. It was the first time Caite had seen him smile. She would miss it.

He turned and walked back to his blue box and its open door.

"Look after that house of yours," he called to her, "It may soon be the last of its kind."

Caite nodded, not quite sure what he meant.

The Doctor nodded to the other man, who had been watching their farewell with a look of mild amusement. At the nod, he withdrew into the white dome and closed the door.

With a sad wave, the Doctor closed the door of his box.

There was a moment's pause.

A wind blew up, sweeping the dust from the ground. A sound like rolling thunder echoed down the valley as the light on top of the blue box lit up and started to flash. As the sound grew and then faded, both box and dome whispered out of existence.

Caite stood still for a while, watching the dust settle. Refusing to cry, she turned back to the house. She had to prepare it for their next visitor.

Because there would be one.

B

The sense of fear was palpable. As the numerous representatives and worshippers gathered to pay their tributes on this, the most important of all days in the year, they couldn't help but wonder if their gods had noticed.

Had they realised?

Would they even care?

The containers had been placed in the usual, specified locations, full to the brim with the wares of the planet: the food, the art, the material goods. Between them, those containers represented a good ninety percent of the product of Karesh. They had left themselves enough for a passable existence - enough food to last another year, enough goods to trade with the surrounding planets. The hope was that this year they would be able to make enough money to upgrade the planet's transport system, making their harvesting more efficient.

It hurt to see so much of what they had created taken away, but in return they enjoyed the protection of the most powerful beings in the galaxy, and in their fear they considered this a small price to pay.

There was always a certain amount of dread when this day came around. But on this occasion it was combined with a nervous anticipation. Bad weather had ruined a large number of crops during the spring. The people of Karesh had attempted to make up for this, but there had been a significant drop in both food and goods as a result.

It was this matter that concerned the Kareshan leader, Balen, an old man of much experience and wisdom. He had led the people of Karesh for many years, had organised the harvests and spoken with the Lords about how hard the people worked for them. In turn, the Lords were civil with the people of Karesh, and their threats little more than polite reminders.

Balen himself knew that they did not have to treat them this way. He knew that when they visited, it amused these people to treat them as they did, toying with them, demonstrating their power without the need to lift a finger.

They would arrive in gigantic vessels, designed to cross whole galaxies at a time. These vessels would be stunning, the designs totally contrary to the expectations of space travel. The people of Karesh would be awe-struck and immediately feel inferior, which they were, despite not being as simple as the Lords believed.

It was this lack of effort on their part that concerned Balen. When presented with the diminished tribute, how would these gods react? Would they merely pat his people on the head, as one might do with a favourite pet? Or would they react angrily? If they did, Balen had no way of knowing what to expect. The Lords had never actually demonstrated their power, merely waxed lyrical about it. They were feared across the systems and it was not often they had to make an example of anyone.

In this respect, Balen suspected them of laziness, though he never said. Hardly ever thought it either, as it was rumoured the Lords could read minds.

The Greeting Area was a field on open ground. The containers were in the field behind this, stacked one beside the other in rows and columns that lead them over the brow of a green hill and down the other side. The Greeting Area itself was now a wobbling mass of roughly five hundred people, the select of the planet who would, today, witness the latest visit by their powerful benefactors and protectors. There was a platform at one end, on which Balen stood with two of his ministers. Large fiery torches were placed at either end of the platform, their flames leaping into the orange sky and the smoke gently rising out of sight.

Balen moved to where an address system had been set up facing the throng.

"My people," his voice boomed out across the open space, drifting slightly on the breeze. "The time has come once more, to offer our tribute to those who look over us and protect us."

An agitated whisper travelled through the crowd, as people attempted to temper their excitement with the knowledge they had not achieved as much tribute as previous years.

"And now," Balen continued, "We welcome our Lords to Karesh, so they may accept the tithe we give!" Balen's voice had risen to a cry, his voice shaking with his age.

The voices in the crowd fell silent, as people looked towards the sky, their eyes searching for a sign.

Balen too looked upwards, expecting a spacecraft as large as a city to throw them into shadow at any moment.

The clouds parted, and nothing came.

He glanced at his ministers, who looked back at him with confusion. Never had They been late. Never, in all the years the tribute had been made.

The people were slowly realising that nothing had happened. No ship the size of a city, no towering spires of gleaming gold, no bolts of steel as big as the tallest tower.

Balen approached the address system and was about to speak when a small breeze blew across his face. He turned and realised it had sprung up from the centre of the platform.

There was a sound on the air. Not just the wind, but an odd, mechanical sound. A grinding, moaning noise that got louder and more pained as it went on.

And then something began to take shape in the centre of the platform. It was a little higher than a man, a box with a light that flashed regularly on its top.

Balen and the crowd were looking on in bemusement at the materialisation - this wasn't normally what happened.

The box completed its arrival, revealing itself to be panelled and dark blue in colour. It solidified with a thump; the noise reached a peak and then stopped.

A door opened and a man stepped out, wearing what appeared to be a dining jacket with extremely baggy trousers. His brown hair curled and bobbed in all directions from his head. His rubbery face held a child-like grin.

"I'm terribly sorry I'm late," he said, swaying back and forth while he waved his arms around. "I've just come from Goguant where they do lots of finger painting, but I had to keep telling them it's polite to ask before they steal them from people." He laughed nervously. "Have you ever been to Goguant?"

Balen shook his head, perplexed.

"I wouldn't bother," the man told him, "It's just full of tourists going around dropping things." He mimed something slipping through his fingers, gave a small cry and looked at the floor. "Joan, I dropped the camera again, hon. I'm just fresh outta opposable digits." Another small laugh.

Balen leapt in before another barrage started: "Who are you?"

"I'm the Doctor." The man grabbed Balen's hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically. "I'm

here to collect your tribute."

"Lord, may I speak?"

Balen looked across the room at the envoy, who was sitting on the throne that had been prepared for him. He was looking around, smiling at people and saying please and thank you when others brought him food and gifts. Balen himself had stood back the whole time, allowing the ceremony to progress uninterrupted. But now that the others had gone, he found he had to speak.

"Lord?"

The lord tore his gaze from one of the paintings on the wall and smiled sheepishly at Balen.

"Oh. Sorry, I was just... well..." He gestured at the artwork, his voice taking on an awe-inspired tone. "It's beautiful."

"Thank you, Lord."

This time the alien gave Balen his undivided attention. "Please don't call me Lord," he asked, "'Doctor' is fine."

Balen stepped forward and studied the being's face. "But that is what you are," he said cautiously.

The Doctor shook his head. "I'm not anyone's lord, Balen."

There was a pause. Balen walked further forward, until he stood at the foot of the Doctor's throne.

"Forgive me," he began, "But I find your behaviour to be somewhat different from what we have come to expect."

The Doctor stood and started to slowly walk around the room. He seemed to be filled with some form of nervous energy, as if he couldn't stay still for very long.

"Well, I am a little different to the others you've met," he admitted.

"The other lords demand supplication and entertainment," Balen pointed out, "and are content to be addressed as Lord."

The Doctor smiled and waved a hand, almost apologetically. "Oh, that's because they don't get out much."

Balen's eyes narrowed. He'd tested the waters, now was the time for the question. "May I ask why you are called 'Doctor'?"

The Doctor slowed to a halt. He turned and looked across at Balen. "Because I fix things. Heal situations."

Balen smiled thinly. "You are a troubleshooter." It wasn't a question.

The Doctor turned away and started walking again, studying the sculptures on the other side of the room.

"It gets me out and about," he said, gaining speed. "I get to travel, meet people - anything to get off our home planet. You wouldn't like it, Balen, it's full of people sitting around, not doing anything. They've no curiosity, no sense of adventure. It's like the hardest thing they have to do is get up to look for the remote control and even when they get their hands on it, they can't be bothered to see what's actually on -"

"Why have you been sent here, Doctor?"

Balen's question cut through the Doctor's invective like a knife into flesh.

The Doctor attempted a grin. "No one else could be bothered to come."

"It is due to the low yield, isn't it?" Balen's voice was dead; it would not accept argument.

The Doctor nodded, his face that of a sad clown.

"They're my lords, as well as yours," he muttered, "They... they get me to do their dirty work for them. They say there's been a downturn in offerings over the last ten years or so."

"Which is due to changes in climate, and planetary warming." Balen's voice was quiet. "You can tell our masters we will be doubling our efforts. We do not wish to disappoint them."

With that, Balen turned and began to leave the room, the Doctor stayed where he was and watched him leave. At the door, Balen stopped.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he asked, not looking back, "that whilst you might enjoy the freedom they give you, the lives of thousands, millions, rest on your shoulders?"

He left.

The Doctor opened his mouth, but no words came. Instead, he slowly made his way back to the throne and sat, with his head in his hands.

Later, the words "all the time" could be heard echoing around the chamber.

And so it continued. The Doctor was feted and celebrated by the people of Karesh. They gave all they had, showed him the amounts they stockpiled - art, goods, food. It was all there. And the Doctor nodded as people pointed out how they had managed despite the hardships of recent years, and he smiled as people bowed down when they approached and bowed again when they left.

And during this time Balen avoided him. He was openly polite and diplomatic, of course. As the leader of the people he had to be. But he said nothing of what they had discussed the day the Doctor had first arrived. In turn, the Doctor had avoided looking at the old man, afraid that his eyes might find Balen already looking back at him, searching his face for an answer.

When the day arrived for the Doctor to leave, he had made his decision.

He stood on the balcony of a building in the centre of the capital city - he had pointed out that the platform in the fields was unnecessary and insisted his box be brought into the metropolis. He stood on the balcony and he waved goodbye to the people.

As he retreated, Balen spoke to him for the first time in days.

"No word of hope for my people?"

The Doctor forced himself to look Balen in the eye.

"Your people are fine people. The offering may have been low, but they mean no disrespect. They still give what they cannot afford. They still work hard to ensure that their gods are happy with them."

Balen inclined his head. In acknowledgement or thanks, the Doctor could not say.

"And so what will you be telling our Lords?"

The Doctor turned and made for the doorway. Beyond it, in the centre of the room, stood his blue box.

"I shall be telling the Lords that the people of Karesh work hard to earn their lords' love."

He turned back and smiled.

"It'll be fine," he said, "I'll have nothing but praise for them."

Balen allowed himself a small, genuine smile and left. The Doctor followed him into the room and watched him leave, leaning on his box. Once the old man had gone, the Doctor lifted a key out of his pocket and slotted it into the door of the cabinet.

"You seem to be in rather a happy mood."

The Doctor jumped away from the box. The owner of the voice walked out from behind a drape on the wall. A tall, reedy man, with blond hair and thin lips. His long fingers brushed dust from his clothes - a scarlet cloak hiding a black suit. He carried a cane, headed with a diamond. He stood, leaning nonchalantly on the cane.

"Boy, you startled me there!" the Doctor told him, with forced humour. "Didn't anyone ever teach you to say something when you transduct somewhere? You could at least make a noise, though you'd have to be careful that you don't offend people as soon as you arrive. And it could be confusing in a room full of people breaking wind: 'Hey! Was that you?' 'Don't blame me, I only just got here!'..."

He tailed off. The other man was just staring at him. And not just staring. It was a stare that didn't need a facial expression to go with it. It just was.

"You must have enjoyed your time here." The Doctor didn't reply. "Well?"

As if kicked, the Doctor hurried into answering. "Yes, yes I have. They're nice."

The man grimaced. "Nice, but dull. If it wasn't for the art, I really wouldn't know why we bother with them." His face hardened. "Report."

The Doctor's hands played with each other as he fought to keep the stammer from his voice. "I've met the people, examined the tribute for this year and I'm satisfied that -"

"Well we're not."

The Doctor's face dropped. "But - but I've seen it. It's fine. There's nothing wrong with it."

"Apart from the amount." The cloaked man walked across to the doorway that led to the balcony and looked outside. People were still gathered, the crowd still producing some noise. He pointed out

across the city with his cane. "They came in below the tally again."

The Doctor wavered, uncertain whether to move forward or stay where he was. "But that's not their fault. They've had difficulties - planetary changes, weather conditions, catastrophes."

"Hardly the point." The man didn't turn away from the panorama. "They entered an agreement with us, for a set amount. If necessary they should have sacrificed some of what they kept."

The Doctor straightened. "Well, I've been given responsibility for this decision," he said, swallowing, "and my decision is to recommend that -"

"The council have already made their decision - we cannot be seen to be weak or lenient. Some of the cardinals are concerned we are slowly losing face, appearing effete. Karesh is to be cleansed. Rassilon's Hammer is already being prepared."

This time the Doctor rushed forward, his voice losing its steel and gaining a pleading quality. "No, you mustn't, you don't understand -"

The tall man rounded on him. "You would dare defy the decision of the High Council?"

The Doctor's mouth moved, but no sound came out. He stared at the other, his eyes showing a mixture of fear and horror.

The cloaked man moved closer, until he was staring right into the Doctor face.

"I. Can't. Hear. You," he whispered savagely.

"No." The words barely escaped the Doctor's lips.

"Good." The man strode for the same exit Balen had used earlier. He stopped at the door and smiled unpleasantly at the Doctor.

"Remember this," he said and pointed his cane at the Doctor. "Know your place, little man. You are a fool, and we tolerate you. But do not cross us. Do not antagonise us. For if you were to do so, we would wipe you from the face of space/time just like that - we wouldn't care, no one else would. And we know that you would be too craven to stop us. We didn't have to warn you about Karesh, we could have just left you here."

With that, and a twirl of his cane, the man left.

The Doctor stumbled towards his box, and leant on it for support. Outside, he could hear the voices of hundreds, thousands of people. They believed they had been forgiven. He had told them they would be forgiven.

And now they were going to die.

The tears welled up inside as the Doctor stared at the exit. It was only a short distance out that door, down the stairs, out onto the street. He could warn them, he could tell them...

Grabbing a handle on the door of the box he pulled himself up and stood, resolute.

...Tell them what? That he had lied? That he was powerless? That any moment now they were going to be reduced to so much dust and ash?

Wasn't it better that they wouldn't be aware of the end when it happened?

Wouldn't be aware of how much he'd failed them?

Like he always did.

The tears, forever threatening to break loose, slowly worked their way through his defences, and made their way down his face.

Without a sound, he unlocked the door of the box and went inside. The engines of the box started, the grinding noise swooping up and down, and it vanished.

And a few moments later, the people of Karesh were no more.

Doctor Crypptic: Time Tourist

by Jon DeBurgh Miller

The darkened room was lit momentarily by the hallucinating strobes of a damaged fibre optic cable, and the flickering of furniture burning away in the fire. Straining to see in the dark, the Doctor tried to move his chair over to the door. He wriggled in his bonds but the ropes held him down too tightly to move. He looked back at his companion Sophie, who was tied up behind him, back to back on another chair which the Mesmerizer had roped together prevent them escaping. With a hefty tug and a melodramatic groan, the Doctor clenched his teeth to numb the pain and yanked his arm away, tearing at the bonds.

'Doctor,' Sophie wondered, looking over her shoulder, 'what are you doing?'

'Relax,' he told her, 'I'm almost there, I'll be out of these bonds soon.' He continued to wriggle and shift, carefully avoiding the swinging cables, knowing that if any of them brushed past him and made contact, both he and Sophie would be electrocuted. With one bound the Doctor was free from the chair.

He jumped up and untied Sophie. She stood up and grabbed the Doctor's hand.

'Let's go,' she said.

They burst through the exit door of the Mesmerizer's caravan just before a voice said 'and cut. And then of course the caravan explodes with a BOOM! and for a moment our audience wonders if the Doc and Sophie have been caught in the blast. Okay people, we break for lunch now.'

Director Morris Henburn jumped out of his seat and ran over to the Doctor, AKA camp comedian Danny Drazi. 'That was fabulous Danny. No other word for it. This time next year you'll be the hottest actor in Cosmic Hollywood.'

'Thanks,' Danny replied, wiping a trail of soot from his face. 'Ow, my mascara's all running. Do you think you could ask the effects chaps to turn the heat down a tad for the next take? Thanks love.'

Henburn handed Danny a towel and his star walked off towards his trailer. The pressures of keeping egotistical actors happy were almost too much to bear sometimes. Right on cue, Dizzy Delores, the leading lady, tapped Henburn on the shoulder. 'Oh Mister H,' she whined.

'What is it Dizzy?'

'Did ya think I was OK that take. Only I think I might have been a bit too intellek-chewall ya know. Wouldn't want to show the Doctor up or nothing.'

Henburn patted Dizzy on the back, trying his hardest not to stare at her suitably enhanced movie star body. 'Don't worry Dizzy, you play the air head companion role with perfection.'

Dizzy blushed. 'Aww thank you Mister H, you say the nicest things to a girl.'

After grabbing himself a coffee, Henburn walked towards his office and opened the door. To his surprise, a small man wearing a white linen suit and a fedora hat was already in the room, sitting in Henburn's enormous leather chair.

Henburn was unsure whether he was more shocked by the insolence of someone sitting in his chair or by the fact that this complete stranger had appeared from nowhere.

'Who the devil are you?' Henburn asked.

'I'm the Doctor,' the small man said, 'and as I believe the phrase goes, I'm here to sue your pants off.'

Six thousand miles above the movie set, twenty-five pairs of compound eyes were watching. The Gamrok fleet was waiting for the elimination of a virus that had caused them an unending stream of despair in the course of their long, proud history. A virus they knew as the Doctor.

Chief Gamrok Torkin licked his reptilian lips and stared through the telescope at the cluster of buildings where the Doctor was hiding.

'Strange,' Torkin said to his assistant, Lieutenant Norwic, 'that the Doctor should make his base of operations and training camp so obviously visible to external scanners.'

Norwic looked up at his supervisor. 'Are you sure that is the Doctor's training camp?'

'Of course I am,' Torkin sighed. 'What do you think I am, some kind of idiot? The Doctor is one of those irritating people who like to prepare for every potential situation he encounters. Why just yesterday he re-enacted what he would do if he and his companion were held hostage in a burning building a grand total of twenty four times. Only a perfectionist mind like the Doctor's would make such an effort to prepare for every possible event he might encounter.'

'But maybe this Doctor's different. We've never encountered this incarnation before. He may be less dangerous than the others.'

'Oh I'm sure he is just as dangerous I'm afraid. The Doctor in any form poses a threat to our very existence. You've told me many times how you met one of the Doctor's incarnations several years ago and only just escaped with your talons intact. Our audio spies only managed to record several seconds of dialogue from the camp but they illustrated quite clearly to us, which one of the fleshy creatures was the Doctor. The respect his allies seem to show for him is quite, quite staggering.'

A red light started to blink on Torkin's control console. The Chief Gamrok gave an exaggerated sigh of despair and pressed the answer button. 'Yes, what is it?'

'Sir,' a voice said over the intercom, 'we're almost ready to deploy the assassin squad.'

'Thank you Junior, I'll be right there.' Torkin walked over towards the speedo-lift but Norwic blocked his path. 'Sir, are you sure you should go on this mission? I mean, the Doctor is very dangerous and all those in our crack squad know what they're doing. I'm already down for this mission. Shall I take your place?'

Torkin gave his assistant a stern gaze. 'Seeking promotion are we Norwic?'

The lieutenant looked worried and began to shake his head vigorously, before suddenly stopping as he wondered whether he was reacting in the right way. 'Relax Lieutenant, this is personal for me. Many have tried to take out the Doctor. Many have failed. The troops will support me but I want to be the one who actually kills the imp. The glory and fame I will get from being the killer is worth the risk.'

Henburn ran his fingers through his rapidly decreasing hairline and stared at the stranger in disbelief. 'You are kidding, I hope.'

The figure claiming to be the Doctor span around on the chair and stood up, flipping an umbrella up from the desk and onto his arm. 'Mister Henburn,' the Doctor said, rolling his Rs, 'this film you are making portrays myself, my friends, and events from my life in a most unflattering manner. But I've always believed in free speech. What I really object to, however, is that you didn't ask my permission first.'

Henburn was amazed but was quickly losing his cynicism over the man's identity. Was this really the mythical figure the script had been based on. Was he really here? Of course it was. Who else would it be? Despite never having met the Doctor, Henburn could tell from the man's peculiarity and confidence that it was him. All the signs he had heard matched. Even the clothes matched one of the descriptions that had been described to the scriptwriter during research for the film.

'Listen Doctor,' Henburn pleaded, 'I apologise if there's been any misunderstanding, but I assure you, any similarities in the screenplay with yourself, or any other persons living or dead is purely, purely, coincidental.'

The Doctor marched over to a filing cabinet and pulled open a drawer. He flicked through the folders then picked out the one containing the script. 'Dear oh dear,' said the Doctor, leafing through the script. 'Doctor Cryptic, Tourist in time, travelling with human companions in his phone box shaped Transtemporal Displacer, or TransDis. No, doesn't ring a bell at all.'

'Doctor,' Henburn pleaded, 'let me explain.'

'But there's more,' the Doctor continued, 'half way through the film the Doctor appears dead, only to be replaced by another actor, the character has generomorphed.'

'Our lead actor quit, I assure you nothing more sinister is going on.'

The Doctor didn't look fooled for one minute. Henburn was feeling very off guard. Sure, he'd made true life movies before where those involved had not been happy with their portrayal but that was always with the backing of the major motion picture companies and their legal squads. Henburn had never before been confronted face to face with one of his 'inspirations' as he liked to call them.

The Doctor thrust the folder into Henburn's face. 'I'm sure there are many other elements I would not be happy with. I suggest you abandon the shooting of this film before I see if I can find them out.

The Doctor reached into his jacket and produced another folder. 'In here,' he said, 'is a legal document which compares elements from your script with evidence from my life. I've already had it approved by Solar Legality, and since this is 2090, they are perfectly within their rights to shut you down by force if necessary.'

Henburn snatched the folder from the Doctor, cautiously flicked through the documents and began to read the writ. He had no idea how the Doctor had obtained all this information. 'I don't understand it,' he exhaled, 'I was stringent on security leaks. Every member of the crew was vetted for the highest integrity. How the hell did you learn of the project, let alone get hold of the script?' He turned another page. 'And photos? By the Goddess I'm gonna kill the snitch when I find out who it was.' He looked up at the sky and shook his fist. 'Curse you, Internet!'

The Doctor gave a smug grin, which Henburn found intensely annoying. 'Oh I assure you Mr Henburn, it wasn't one of your workers who told me about the project.' The Doctor raised his voice at this point and Henburn was unsure whether the little man was angry or excited. 'Remember who I am and what I do.'

Henburn was puzzled and the Doctor's exasperated look showed that the strange man could see this. 'I went to see it in the cinema early next year if you must know.'

Henburn swore. How could he have been so stupid? Only he would try to produce an unauthorised movie about a real lifetime traveller and expect not to be found out. Henburn realized that the reason he had been so blasé about the project was that despite what the writer said, he had never deep down believed in time travel. 'Curse you scepticism,' Henburn said, once again shaking his fist to the sky.

Chief Torkin peered over the bank of grass his platoon had hidden behind after the scout ship had dropped them off and the humans in the area had been rounded up and locked away. He lifted a pair of magnifiers to his eyes and searched around for the most likely location of the Time Lord. Lights were on in the main training building but he was unable to see inside. Eventually, Torkin spotted that a light was on in what intelligence reports had stated was the Doctor's bunker, a large rectangular object on wheels with plastic steps leading up to the door which lay outside the main building, across a concrete field.

'Ah,' Torkin said to himself, 'the Doctor obviously denies himself too much luxury, less his clarity of thought is lessened by material possessions.'

The Chief motioned his platoon forward and they ran towards the Doctor's hideaway, skilfully avoiding the torch beams of the security guards. They hid behind the metal cabin and Torkin motioned for his men to wait while he planned their next move.

'I'll knock on the door,' he said, 'and I'll make the Doctor invite me into his bunker. You all follow close behind and when I have made him apologise for his crimes, you may attack him. Norwic, I want you to go and look for any wayward humans we might have missed on our little round up.' His lieutenant nodded, and walked back towards the studio. 'OK,' Torkin breathed, 'let the plan commence.'

After Torkin had knocked three times the bleary eyed figure who Torkin believed to be the Doctor opened the door and looked resignedly at the Gamrok. 'Can I help you?'

'My name is Torkin,' the alien said, relishing in his big moment, 'and you're going to die.'

Several hours later, everyone had suddenly left the sound stage and Henburn had given the Doctor the entry code. After finally getting into the primitive padlock, the Doctor stepped carefully across the dimly lit studio floor, being careful not to tread on any of the highly dangerous electrical cable and crept up to the camera. He was about to flick the switch to release the film reel when the silence was broken by the crash of a light bulb falling to the ground, just metres away behind the Doctor. The Doctor quickly turned round and looked at the smashed pieces of glass. Why would a light bulb suddenly fall out? He glanced hesitantly up towards the observation gantry and was sure he caught a glimpse of a shadow moving. Maybe it was just his imagination.

'Hello?' he called, into the low light. 'Who's there?' Silence. The Doctor ran up some artificial metal stairs to the metal gantry above the stage and peered over at the empty light socket. He reached into his coat pocket, grabbed a pen torch and shone it into the socket.

'Interesting.' The Doctor deliberately raised his voice. 'It's very cunning, to steal a light bulb in order

The Doctor closed his eyes and listened carefully. He tried to peel the layers of sound away until beneath the hum of the air conditioning he could hear a quiet and steady breathing noise.

'Step out from the shadows,' the Doctor called with hesitance. 'I'm not here to hurt you.'

The Doctor opened his eyes to see a shape emerging from the dark. A shape vaguely humanoid, but clearly not human.

'Ah hello,' said the Doctor, 'you must be an extra on the film. Terribly hot inside there, I'm sure. Oh well, art is art. Now, I wonder if you could direct me to-'

'Silence,' the creature said. 'I, am no extra. I am a Gamrok. We are here to kill you.'

The Doctor walked up to the creature and tugged at it's face, but no mask came off. He felt the skin. Warm, pulsing. This was no movie costume.

The Doctor frowned. 'So, Mr Henburn has himself a genuine alien on set does he? Gamrok, you say. Hmm. Gamrok. no, can't say it rings a bell. Didn't you used to present Blockbusters?'

'Your world has not heard of my supreme planet, as you are too trivial to concern us.'

'Aah, so it's not me, as in me with a capital 'M' you might say, but me as in the race of this planet.'

The Gamrok looked confused and shoved the barrel of his gun further up the Doctor's chin. 'Less talk, Earthling.'

'Shall I tell him, or will you?' the Doctor said to no one in particular.

The Gamrok pulled the Doctor from the wall and moved the gun to his spine. Grabbing the Doctor's shoulder, the Gamrok shoved him forward whilst keeping the gun tightly clasped to the Time Lord's body. 'Walk. We are going to get you pathetic creatures all together so we can kill you one by one.'

'Thank you,' the Doctor said, 'I love it when people like you tell me their plan, it does help rather in escaping.'

'Silence,' the Gamrok shouted, but the Doctor kept rambling.

'You know, I was wondering, if this planet is too trivial to concern you, why are you invading?'

The Gamrok sighed. 'If I tell you, will it shut you up?'

'Probably.'

'We're here to find the one called the Doctor. We have him locked up on the other side of this complex. His execution will commence in one half of your earth hours.'

'Oh dear,' was the only thing that seemed appropriate for the Doctor to say.

To an outside observer it would appear that there was nothing amiss in Danny Drazi's trailer. All anyone would see would be the comedian sitting at a table having tea with an eight foot high green alien, while several more aliens stood and watched. Another peaceful day on the set of *Doctor Cryptic*. But things were far from peaceful.

'So you think purple skin tones would be more fearsome?' Torkin asked.

'Oh definitely.' Drazi reached down into his bag and produced a pot of make-up. 'Here, try this one.'

Torkin looked cautiously at the pot then rubbed some onto his skin. He peered into the mirror and arched an eyebrow.

'Believe me,' Danny said, 'that is just so you.'

Torkin put the pot down and stood up from the table. 'I must thank you, Doctor; these last few hours have been most enjoyable. It is a shame you have to die so horribly at my hands.'

Danny sighed, 'Oh Gammy, do we have to go through this again? How many times do I have to tell you, I am not him.'

'Do not mock me Doctor. I admire your fine taste in fashion and style, and I respect you as almost an intellectual equal to myself. You are however one of the greatest enemies of my race and as such no amount of pretending to be someone else will change your fate.'

'Look, I've been sitting here for hours. I thought that they'd come to clean up this place for the night so I wasn't worried about escaping. Now however I'm a bit pissed off so if you don't mind, I'll just toddle off home. Come back tomorrow, talk to our lovely Director Morris Henburn and arrange a meeting with my agent. Then, if I am who you think I am you can kill me. All I ask is that you go home and type Danny Drazi into a search engine. Then we'll see who the fool is.'

'Do not mock us, Time Lord. We know that you are capable of traversing the dimensions of space and time. You could have set up an alter ego on this planet to provide a cunning escape method for

situations like this.'

Danny sighed. 'In that case, I guess I'm stuck here. Did you know you've got split ends?'

Suddenly the trailer shook to a heavy banging on the door. The door flew open and Norwic burst in, thrusting a figure in front of him.

'I found this crawling around outside. I thought you'd dealt with all the humans.'

Torkin looked up in despair. 'Please Norwic, the Doctor and I were having a nice little discussion about his execution.'

'Ha!' said the man who the lieutenant had brought in, silent up until this point. 'I think I see what's happened. You think he's me?'

The Gamrok's faces looked blank.

'I am the Doctor. He's just an actor.'

'*Just?*' shrieked Danny in disgust, 'just? I'll have you know I'm one of the finest entertainers in…'

'Quiet,' the Doctor and Torkin said in chorus. They looked at each other with surprise and the Doctor continued his analysis of the situation. 'I am the real Doctor you're looking for.'

Torkin slammed his fists down on the table. 'Enough! What is it with this planet? You all want to be people you're not. This is intolerable.' He took a deep breath, bit his lip and stared at the Doctor, slightly shaking his head. 'You, are a mere human. To pretend to be the most evil Time Lord ever to have foiled our plans, why, it's so insolent it defies belief.'

'I'm not the Doctor,' Danny said, exasperated, but no one was listening to his words.

'Check my hearts,' the Doctor said. 'Humans have but one heart, I have two.'

'He tries to trick us,' Norwic said, 'let me just kill him here.'

His superior, however, was more cautious. 'Calm down, my impatient henchman; we only want to kill the Doctor. Check his heartbeat so we can prove to this man that he's lying.

Norwic walked up to the Doctor, grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and placed his extra arms on the Doctor's chest.

'Chit,' swore Norwic.

The leader rolled his eyes and put his hand to his forehead. 'Oh no, you mean I've just been...' he motioned to Danny, 'with that thing...' He reached over to Danny and frantically planted his hands on the actor's chest. 'Nothing. Damn.'

Danny looked up hopefully at the Gamrok. 'Does this mean I'm not the Doctor anymore?'

'Leave us!' the leader snapped, and Danny did, running out of the door and across the car park as fast as his legs could carry him.

While Norwic held the Doctor's hands tightly behind his back, Torkin was sitting at the coffee table with his head buried in his hands.

'This has to be the worst assignment we've ever had,' he said resignedly.

'What,' said Norwic, 'worse than the killer Petro-rabbits on Gallopugus 3?'

Torkin looked up at the Doctor. 'You won't be at all pleased to know,' he said with a sneer, 'that I've changed my mind. We're going home Lieutenant, now. I am too important to stay on this wretched planet a moment longer.'

'But what about the sunrise execution?'

'As they say on the streets, Fruck that,' he said, as he pulled a blaster gun from his waist holster. 'I will see you later, Doctor. Much later.'

Norwic stood to the side and his leader fired the weapon. The Doctor ducked as an energy bolt surged past him, narrowly singing the top of his jacket. The Doctor leapt over to the wall and flicked the light switch. All the Gamrok screamed in agony and fell to the floor, clutching their eyes. The Doctor seized his opportunity and pushed forward, clutching his hat tightly to his head. He leapt out of the caravan and began a mad run to the studio. He knew he would only have a few moments before the Gamrok recovered and came after him. When the Doctor got to the fire doors he saw that they had been locked for the night. He ran around the outside wall of the studio until he found a small maintenance cupboard door that had been left open. He darted inside and found himself in what looked like an old train tunnel.

'I should be safe in here,' he said. The Doctor had a terrible habit of speaking too soon. He listened to the low hum of machinery beneath his feet, and as he did he realized where he was. He'd seen the film after all, and this was the earthquake sequence. Suddenly, the Doctor heard a banging noise from behind a piece of scenery. He rushed around to see what was going on, cautious in case he ran into a Gamrok. He had no idea how many of them were lying around. He was greeted by the sight of two dozen humans, all tied up and gagged. He quickly freed them but before a word of thanks was uttered, a furious Morris Henburn accosted him.

'Two hours,' Henburn screamed, 'I've been held captive in my own studio. What the blazes is going on Doctor?'

'I don't know,' the Time Lord responded. 'Just stay back here and be quiet. I'm trying to get rid of those who held you captive as quickly as possible.'

He ran across to the other side of the room where there was a control panel for the various special effects in the room. There was a loud bang as the door the Doctor had come in flew open. The Gamrok poured in, and began to make their way across the set.

'There he is!' shrieked Torkin. 'Get him!'

The Doctor slammed down the controls to activate the set. Quickly, the humming noise got louder, and louder, and louder. And then the ground began to shake. Suddenly, the floor beneath the Gamrok split in two and they were thrown to the side, having narrowly avoided falling into a deep chasm.

The Gamrok were looking all around the live movie set for a way to get out, but they were surrounded on all sides by chaos. They ploughed through the force of burst water mains, avoided falling rubble and breaking stone pillars, artfully dodged derailed subway cars and narrowly avoided being crushed by jumping out just in time from underneath a falling oil tanker. Eventually, however, they reached the Doctor. The only way the Time Lord could see to escape was down the chasm. The Doctor doffed his hat to the Gamrok. 'Going down,' he said, holding his nose in a mock diving position with one hand while the other stopped his hat from flying off. As the Doctor jumped, he noticed Henburn watching from a distance with a look of awe in his eyes. The drop was about twice the Doctor's height and he stumbled as he landed. The Doctor brushed off his coat. 'There. No bones broken.' The Doctor looked around and realized he was in a very dangerous position. All around pistons and pipes were moving, controlling the earthquake simulation above. In any moment the set would reset itself and the Doctor faced the risk of being trapped under a piece of scenery. He ducked as low as he could and crawled towards a wall where the green glow of an emergency fire exit light glowed in the darkness.

When the Doctor emerged from the exit he realized where he was, back on the set where he had first met the Gamrok. He ran to the camera and flicked open the catch to release the film reel. He stared around for a metal container and found that a film canister had been left conveniently by the side of the camera. He placed the film reel in the canister and reached into his pocket for a lighter. 'Easy as pyromania,' he muttered. He lit the reel and watched the intoxicating spectacle as the plastic melted and merged in a ballet of flame.

But this was no time for indoor fireworks. The Gamrok would almost certainly be searching the studio for him. He had to find a way to make them leave. He'd freed Danny Drazi by convincing them who his identity was. Now he had to convince them to leave Earth.

Just then, a crash came from the other side of the studio. The Doctor looked around for a place to flee to but was too slow, and before he realized it, three very angry Gamrok confronted him.

'At last, we have you, Doctor.'

'I keep telling you, I'm not the Doctor,' the Doctor said, knowing his words would go unheard. It was worth a try though.

Gamrok Torkin shook his head in despair. 'Don't try this again. We tested you. We know you are the true Time Lord.'

'He's right,' said a voice from the shadows. 'I am the true Doctor.' All eyes turned to look to where the voice was coming from and a figure emerged from the shadows that the Doctor recognized as being one of the technicians the Gamrok had held captive.

Another figure emerged. This time, it was the cameraman. 'He's lying. I'm the true Doctor.'

And another. 'I am the Doctor who defeated the Daleks on numerous worlds, who freed the slave people on Cetrus Four. Who nailed every Gamrok butt halfway across the known universe.'

An impressive speech, the Doctor thought. That must be the writer of the film.

'Enough,' shouted Torkin, but yet more people emerged from the darkness.

'We are all Doctor,' they chorused.

'Do you remember how I defeated your race?' the writer (and a rather good actor, it seemed) said. 'Do you remember the pain and the suffering? I can do that again. Right now. These primitive humans are of no consequence.' He held up a TV remote control. 'One press of this button and the whole place goes up in smoke.'

'You see Torkin,' the real Doctor said, putting his arm around the Gamrok's shoulder. 'the Doctor is not one person. It's a job description. Across the universe there are thousands of Doctors. Of course, the Time Lords tell everyone we are one man with many faces, but that's just a lie.'

'But what about the hearts?' Torkin sneered.

'Some Doctors have one, some two, some more.' The Doctor grabbed Henburn and stealthily stole his pager from his pocket. Slipping it under the director's shirt he set the device to shake and called Norwic over.

'It's true,' Norwic said, this one has a heartbeat on that side of his chest as well.'

'Oh no,' sighed the Gamrok. 'This really can't be true.'

'I'm afraid it is. Do you have a picture of the man you think defeated you before?'

The Gamrok looked suspiciously at the Doctor and reached inside his armour, producing a small hologram projector. A small picture appeared of a man with a long, regal face and brown hair. A man much younger looking than the Doctor. 'You see Torkin,' said the Doctor, 'that looks nothing like me. Or anyone here. Do you really think if we could change our appearance we would interfere in the events of minor races like these humans?'

Norwic looked at Torkin. 'Erm, Commander, he does kind of have a point.'

Torkin paused, as if in thought, then looked up determinedly at the Doctor. 'You will tell me where I may find the Doctor we are looking for.'

'Of course,' said the Doctor, smiling. 'Second star on the right, straight on till morning.'

A while later, the atmosphere on the set was far more relaxed. In one corner of the set, the humans were clasped together, chattering with and congratulating each other on their performances. The Gamrok were standing uncomfortably in another corner while they waited for their ship to come and pick them up, while the Doctor stood across the room talking to Henburn.

'Please, Mr Henburn,' the Doctor was saying, 'please don't make this film.'

'Relax Doctor,' the director said. 'I've decided that having anything to do with you is far too hazardous. Besides,' he said, walking over to where the Gamrok were standing, 'I have a new project now.' He put his arm around the Gamrok leader's shoulder and pulled him away from the others. He began walking towards his office. 'Can I have a word, Torkin? When you were chasing one of the Doctors, well, it was remarkable. You had style, you had elegance; you had box office potential. So, before you rush off back to Venus or wherever it is you come from, I have a proposition to make to you.'

Torkin looked confused. 'A proposition?'

'Let me tell you about a vision I have,' Henburn continued, 'a vision called Gamrok: An Alien Musical.'

SIMON FRASER
2001

Davros: The Early Years

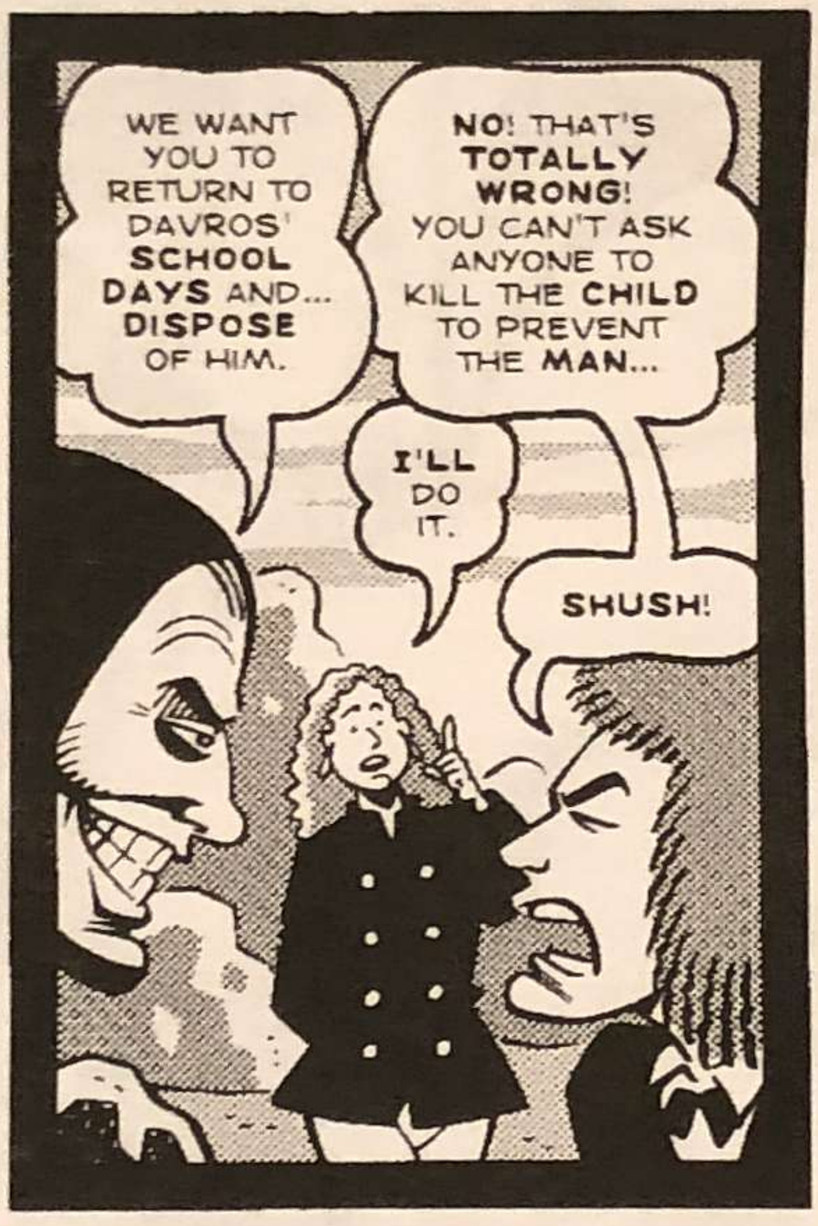
by Rupert Booth and Barry Williams, with Roger Langridge

OI! WHAT THE HELL'S THIS?
IT'S A QUARRY. A REAL QUARRY! WITH PROPER MIST!

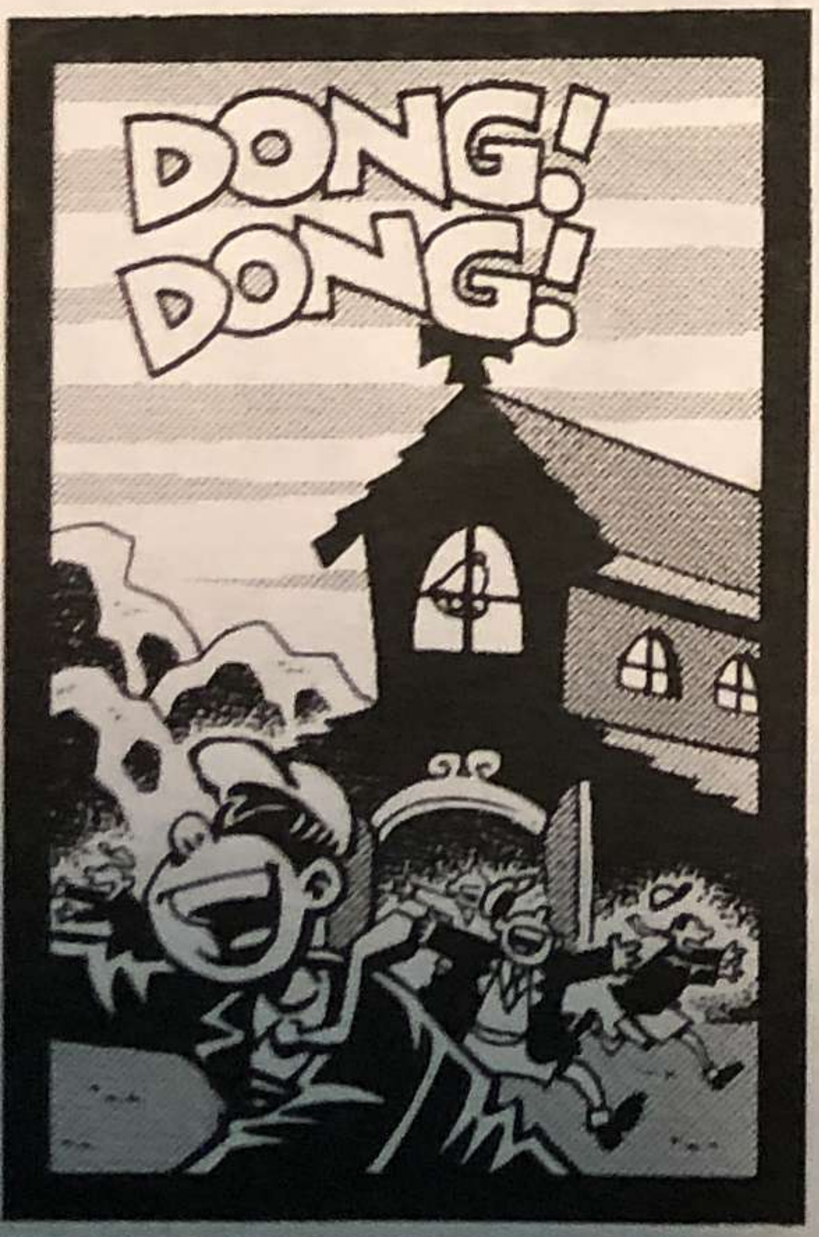
AH! WELCOME, DOCTOR.
OH, NO. NOT AGAIN...

WELL, YOU DIDN'T DO VERY WELL LAST TIME, DID YOU?
UNLIKE SOME, I HAD SOME MORAL DILEMMAS TO PLAY OUT.
WHAT'S GOING ON?

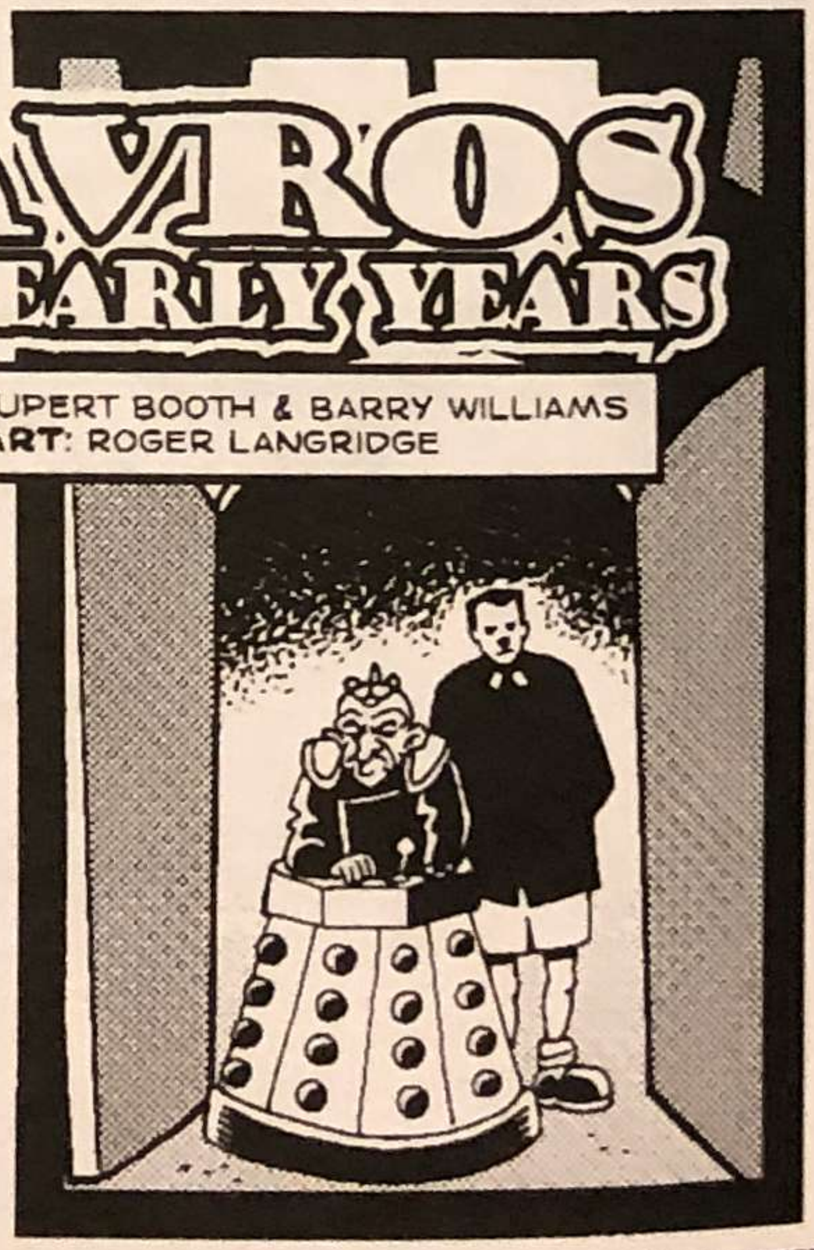
WELL, YOU CAN FORGET ALL OF THAT. YOUR MISSION IS TO KILL DAVROS BEFORE HE EVEN GETS A CHANCE TO DEVELOP THE DALEKS.


WE WANT YOU TO RETURN TO DAVROS' SCHOOL DAYS AND... DISPOSE OF HIM.
NO! THAT'S TOTALLY WRONG! YOU CAN'T ASK ANYONE TO KILL THE CHILD TO PREVENT THE MAN...
I'LL DO IT.
SHUSH!

EXCELLENT! NO NEED TO SET THE SPACE/TIME CO-ORDINATES -- YOU'RE HERE. THIS IS THE PLAYGROUND.


DONG! DONG!

DAVROS
THE EARLY YEARS
STORY: RUPERT BOOTH & BARRY WILLIAMS
ART: ROGER LANGRIDGE



IS THAT HIM?

YES. HERE.

SCHOOL REPORT
DAVROS – YEAR 30

BIOLOGY B	Davros must stop trying to genetically re-engineer the school mice
CDT A	He shows a fanatical desire to perpetuate himself in his machines
ENGLISH A+	He works without compassion, without soul, without pity
GAMES D-	Shows no ability or interest

GENERAL COMMENTS:
Must learn to get on with the rest of the universe

DAVROS! ON YER HEAD!

THWACK

NYDER.

YES, DAVROS.

MINEFIELD

YOU BASTARDS!

KABLAM

GONNA KILL YOU, DAVROS!

SWOT!

DAVROS... THEY HAVE INJURED YOU.

NEVER MIND, NYDER. OUR RETALIATION WILL BE SO MASSIVE... SO MERCILESS... THAT IT WILL LIVE IN HISTORY.

I DON'T BELIEVE THIS...

COME, NYDER, WE SHALL PLAN OUR **REVENGE**.

YES, DAVROS...

I... I **LOVE** YOU, DAVROS.

PERHAPS I CAN PERSUADE DAVROS NOT TO **BUILD** THE DALEKS IN THE **FIRST** PLACE... OR TO GO INTO **BOTANY** OR SOMETHING...

STOP WASTING TIME, DOCTOR. LET'S **TWAT** HIM ONE.

YOU REALLY HAVE NO MORAL PERSPECTIVE AT **ALL**, HAVE YOU?

YES, MEN... TO **DEFEAT** THAT BUNCH OF FOOTBALLING MORONS... THAT POWER WOULD SET US UP **ABOVE THE GODS**!!

TELL US YOUR **PLAN**, DAVROS!

DAVROS' GANG! KEEP OUT! INTRUDERS WILL BE EATEN BY CLAMS

HEAD BOY **GHARMAN** WILL LURE THEM INTO A SENSE OF **FALSE SECURITY** WITH HIS OBVIOUS **DECENCY**. MEANWHILE, I WILL DEVELOP A RACE OF **MARK ONE TRAVELLING MACHINES** WHICH WILL ROLL IN AND **EXTERMINATE EVERY ONE OF THEM**!!

NYDER, YOU WILL BRING UP THE REAR.

THANK YOU... THAT IS WHAT I NEEDED TO KNOW.

THE GANG WILL BE SECURED TO THESE **ELECTRICAL DEVICES**. IF ANY OF YOU **DEVIATE** FROM THE ATTACK, YOUR FRIENDS WILL **SUFFER**.

YOU ARE **INSANE**, DAVROS!!

SLAM

HE'LL COME ROUND.

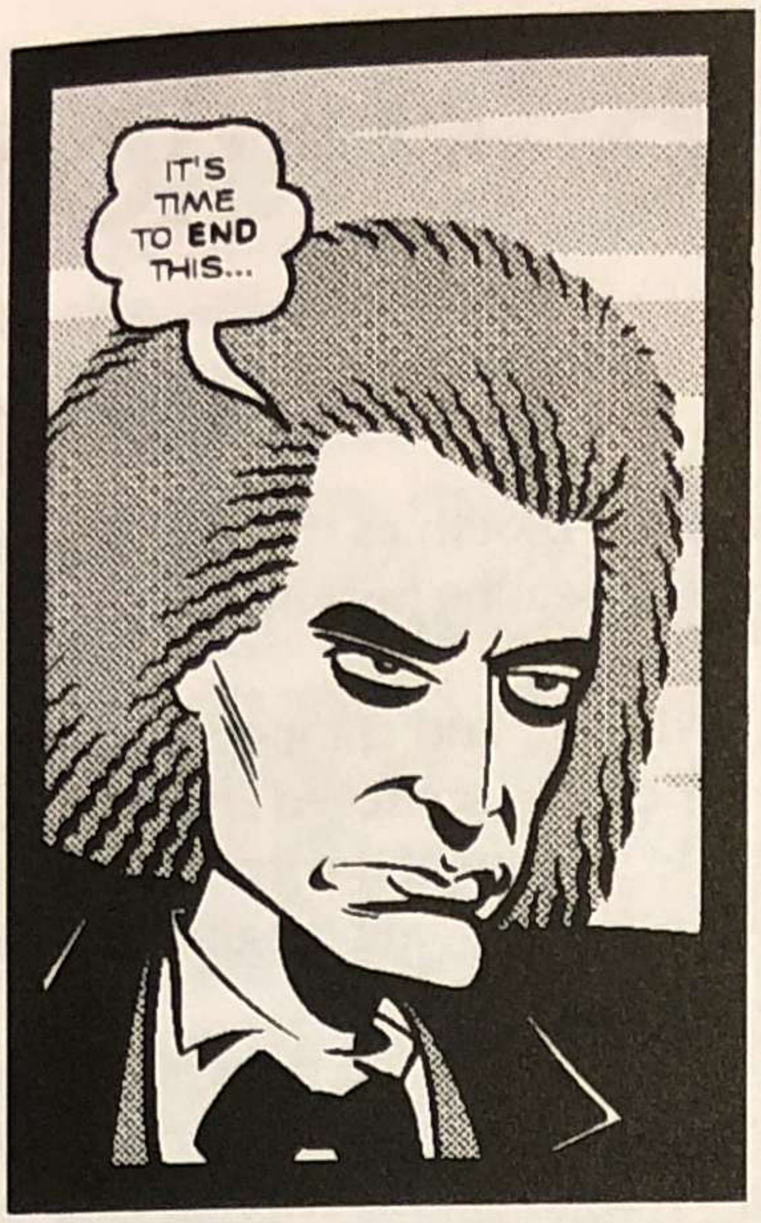
IN THE MEANTIME, **WE**, THE **ELITE**, SHALL GO ON!

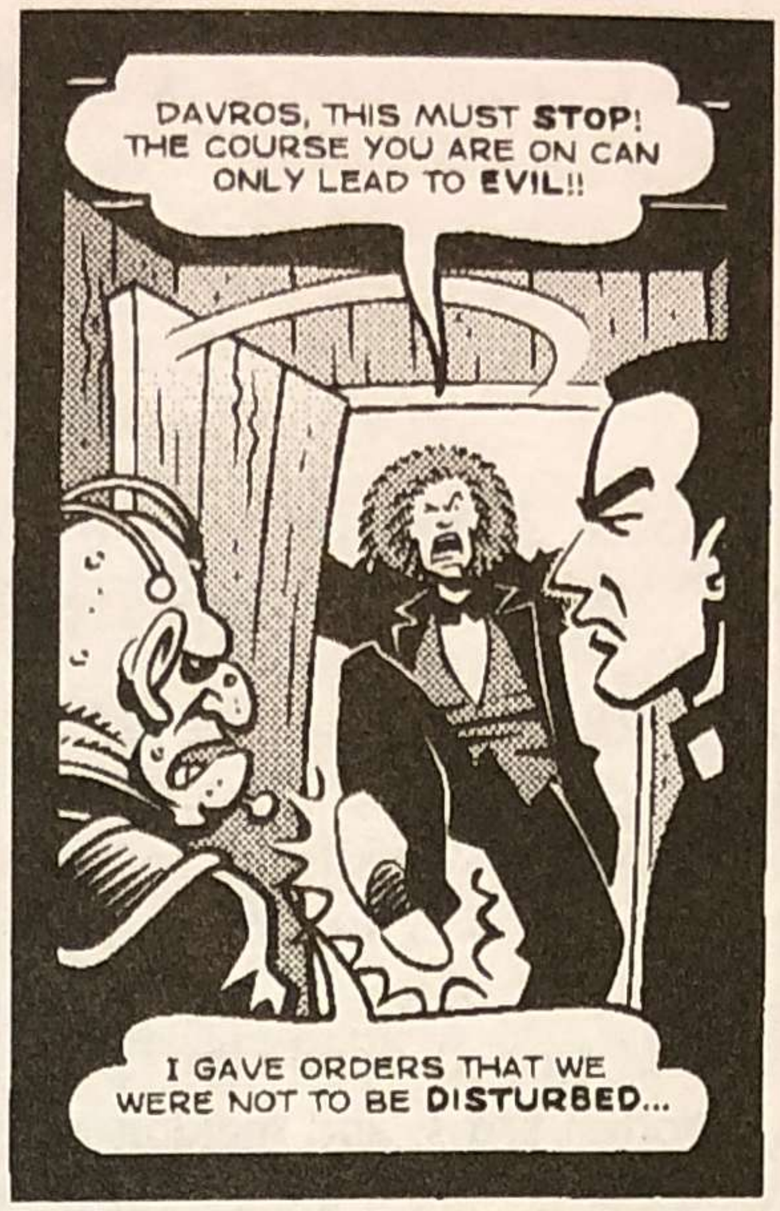
THWUD!

BY THE WAY, DAVROS... I SPRAYED THE GANG HUT WITH YOUR **INVENTION** -- A **CHEMICAL** THAT MAKES IT STRONGER THAN 30-FOOT-THICK **CONCRETE**.

GOOD.

NEED MORE **WEAPONS**...


IT'S TIME TO END THIS...


DAVROS, THIS MUST STOP! THE COURSE YOU ARE ON CAN ONLY LEAD TO EVIL!!
I GAVE ORDERS THAT WE WERE NOT TO BE DISTURBED...

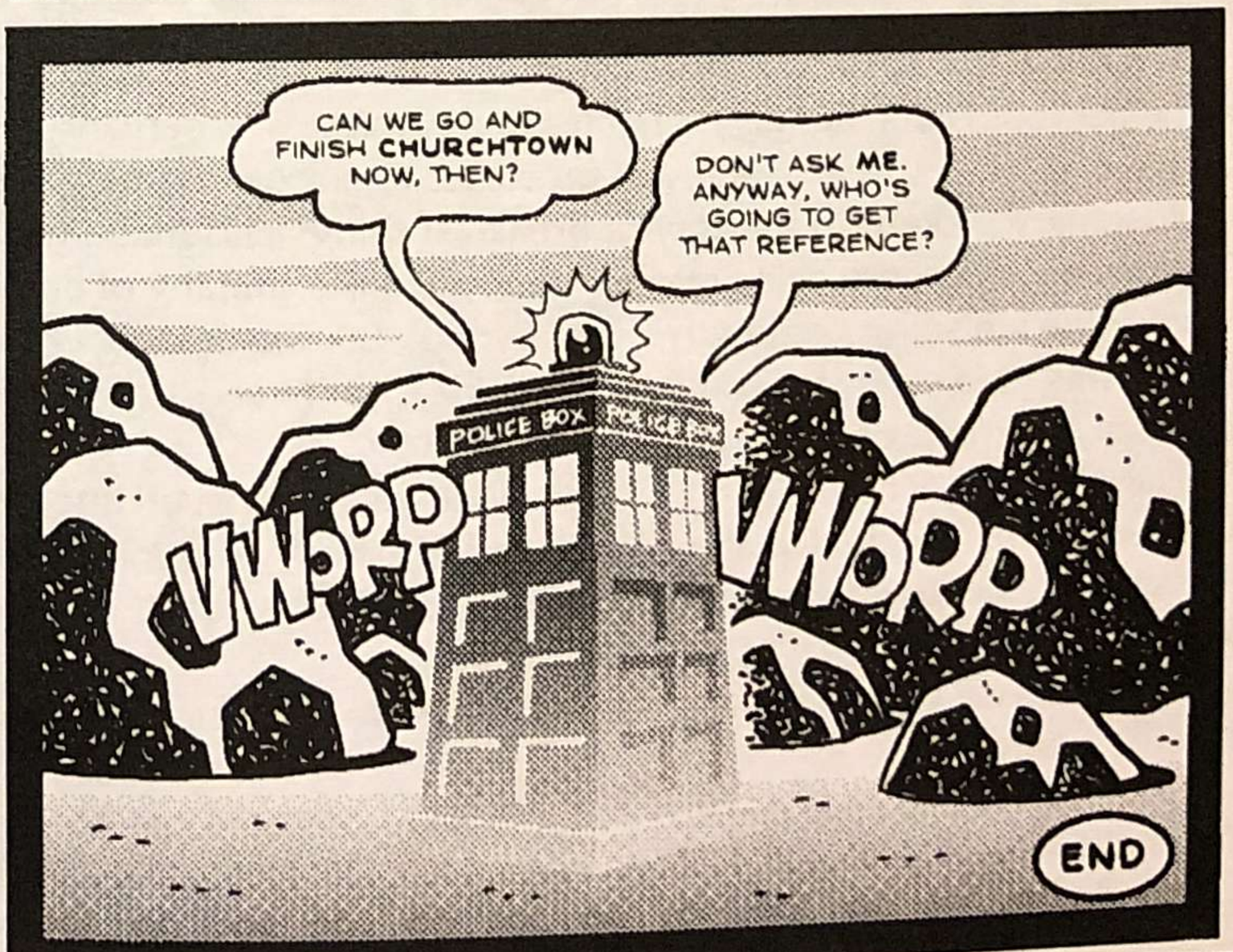
LISTEN TO ME, DAVROS. DON'T THROW YOUR LIFE AWAY ON MINDLESS ENDEAVOUR! GO BACK TO YOUR FIRST LOVE!
YOU MEAN... INTERIOR DECORATING?
WELL... IF YOU SAY SO.

WHAT?
YES... YES... THE ABILITY TO CHOOSE THE CORRECT PASTEL SHADES TO OFFSET THE SOFA...
KLIK
I WOULD DO IT! DOCTOR, YOU HAVE SET MY LIFE ON A WHOLE NEW COURSE!

THOOM

...
OH DEAR.

LATER...
OH, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. I'M ONLY A FAN DOCTOR. IT'S NOT AS IF IT'S CANON OR ANYTHING.
LOOK, I'VE SAID I'M SORRY.


CAN WE GO AND FINISH CHURCHTOWN NOW, THEN?
DON'T ASK ME. ANYWAY, WHO'S GOING TO GET THAT REFERENCE?
POLICE BOX
VWORP
VWORP
END

Constance

by Paul Ferry

The kettle screamed throughout the house, steam gushing from it's stifled mouth as it sat rattling on the hot-plate of the coke-fired range, it's surface blackened from centuries of searing heat that no amount of vigorous polishing could ever hope to wipe away.

The whistling echoed through the kitchen, over the pots and pans, dented and chipped through a thousand roast dinners, a million cold suppers. It whistled round the enamel sink, scratched and scoured, chipped away to blackness and flakes of zinc. It whistled across the florid surface of the ironing board, scorched and brown, and in and out of the limbs of the clothes-horse from which hung gingham towels and an oven-glove amusingly shaped like a trout.

Whistling out of the kitchen, the sound echoed around the sitting room, brushing the tattered surface of the blue twill settee with worn wooden arms, and making a cursory pass over it's two matching armchairs. It whistled around the radiogram, vibrating the copper coils within, before echoing off over the coals in the grate.

It commenced to whistle over the newell-post and over the banisters, up the stairs, and there met Rosemary, scampering over the stair-carpet in hastily buckled shoes. Her stockings laddered and quickly mended, her flower print dress flowing behind her as she attempted to fasten up her hair, grips between her teeth. The clock chimed nine. She was late; Constance would be expecting her breakfast. Rosemary had allowed herself to sleep in too long; she had scurried down ten minutes ago, lit up the range, put on the kettle, then hastened away to get dressed. Constance would never forgive her should she dare to deliver breakfast still dressed in her night things.

The kettle was dancing on the hob as Rosemary bustled into the kitchen, sliding the last grip into her pinned-up up auburn hair. Hurriedly, she grabbed a tea-towel from the clothes-horse and, wrapping it around her hand, lifted the kettle from the plate and placing it elsewhere on the range.

Shrugging off the towel, she took two measures of tea from a tin featuring a picture of a Scotsman and emptied them into a shiny brown teapot. She added water to the pot, and then busied herself with preparing a cup and saucer on a wicker tray. She prepared a bowl of cornflakes and a jug of fresh milk, as was Constance's preferred morning fare. Then, slipping a crocheted tea cosy over the pot, she lifted that too onto the tray and breakfast was ready. She glanced at the kitchen clock - five past nine. Good. With luck, Constance wouldn't even have woken yet and would be unaware at the slight lateness of her breakfast.

KNOCK! KNOCK! barked the ceiling above Rosemary's head. It was Constance, knocking with her cane on the bedroom floor, hungry for her tea and cornflakes. Rosemary smiled ruefully. Oh well, she was close. Just have to make sure that she was up earlier tomorrow morning. And the next day. And the next...

Rosemary picked up the tray of breakfast things and made her way carefully up the stairs toward Constance's room, the china rattling gently like the chiming of tiny bells. It was a sound that Rosemary adored; the whistling kettle screamed 'work!', but the tinkling china simply whispered 'relax', like the gently whispering wings of some benign fairy. It continued it's comforting litany as Rosemary approached the heavy oak bedroom door.

Placing the tray carefully on the carpet, Rosemary delved into the pocket of her dress and retrieved a rusted mortis key, which she slipped into the heavy black lock and turned with a solid CLICK. Then, she slipped the key back into her pocket and picked up the breakfast tray and cautiously elbowed open the heavy door.

"Constance," said Rosemary, smiling. "I've got your breakfast. Sorry it's a little late..." and she slipped into the bedroom.

Amaryllis was frowning at the console as the Doctor ambled jauntily into the console room, hands jammed in his pockets, bow tie crooked and wire-wool hair escaping in all directions. He had been

trying to teach his companion, the psychic vampire girl from some unknown planet, the basics of flying the TARDIS, but it was far from easy going. At the moment, the console itself was covered with yellow post-it notes that curled occasionally and blew off like some crazy autumn tree. She tried her best, bless her, but lacked a certain natural aptitude for space/time travel, having already almost collided the ship with two asteroids and a number 47 London bus.

She lifted her head slightly, her hair a flaming red curtain against the black velvet dress she wore, and observed the Doctor with cavernous brown eyes.

"D-16 section, tempero-spatial reconfiguration section. Right?" questioned Amaryllis.

"Spatio-temporal" corrected the Doctor, settling into a Georgian chair near the console and glancing briefly at a copy of Origin of the Species before tossing it aside with an air of 'been-there, done-that' contempt.

Amaryllis winced, partly because she had got it wrong and partly because the Doctor seemed to take such pleasure in correcting her.

"Test me then," said Amaryllis.

"What's NV-782?" asked the Doctor, sitting back and smiling.

"Fluid link section," the girl smiled.

"Very good," commended the Doctor. He was genuinely impressed, maybe he was getting through to her after all. "G-6?"

"Fast return switch."

"Excellent," beamed the Doctor. "D-84?"

"D-84?" All trace of self-congratulation left Amaryllis like rats deserting a sinking ship. "I've never heard of D-84!"

"I'm not surprised," smiled the Doctor. "He was a robot friend of mine some years ago." And he laughed at his own little joke.

Amaryllis was less impressed. "You tricked me," she said, standing arms crossed.

The Doctor leaned forward. "Yes, but congratulations, you recognised that it wasn't a part of the TARDIS."

"Hmm," said Amaryllis, turning back to the console. "So, what does that red flashing light mean then?"

"Which red flashing light?"

"The one in..." Amaryllis searches her memory - and the post-it notes - for the correct section, "Section G-11, Incoming and Retrievals sect..."

The Doctor was out of his seat and shoving her out of the way before she could finish her sentence. His hands moved over the console like a speeded-up old film, sending squares of yellow paper flying in all directions.

"What is it?" demanded Amaryllis.

"Maximum distress beacon," replied the Doctor. "Someone's in real trouble and we're in just the right quadrant to help them out."

"What sort of trouble?"

"I'm trying to get it up on the scanner..." the Doctor's fingers blurred against the controls once more, and Amaryllis followed his gaze to the pole upon which the scanner screen was mounted across the room. The scanner hissed and crackled into life, showing the scene of a small grey shuttlecraft, damaged and listing badly, power-diving the atmosphere of a peaceful green planet.

"Some kind of shuttle crash," the Doctor leaned in closely to the instruments, his face illuminated by the continuing crimson flash. "He's trying to pull against the gravitational pull, but the G-force is too great. Poor soul."

It was the hint of finality in the Doctor's voice that stirred up a contrasting tone of Samaritan charity in Amaryllis. She fished for ideas; there must be some way to help the occupants of the shuttle in a vessel as technically advanced as the TARDIS. There must be. She suggested, Couldn't we materialise around the shuttlecraft?"

"Not without neutralising inertia, which is a physical implausibility," he didn't even look up from the controls as he addressed her. "The shuttle would still crash, only inside the TARDIS, which would create an almighty explosion. And before you ask, no, it's not feasible to materialise on board either, without matching his descent speed which would drag us down too."

Amaryllis shook her head, spent for ideas. "So, what can we do?"

"Nothing," said the Doctor, standing up from the console and solemnly straightening his bow tie. "Only pick up the pieces."

The small shuttle had hit a tree on its way down, which had flipped it onto its roof. It had skidded, burning, partially embedding itself in the soft green turf of a poppy field on a hillside. The explosive bolts designed to jettison the engine had accidentally fired before it stopped moving, catapulting the drive unit, a cartwheeling fireball, into a nearby copse, which burst instantly into flames. The explosion tossed the cockpit, spinning like a top, across the green pasture in a maelstrom of churning soil and oily black smoke, before finally coming to rest, rocking slightly on it's side, in a ditch at the foot of the hill.

The TARDIS arrived, with considerably less incident. Amaryllis was the first out of the doors, her dark eyes narrowing at sight of the carnage around her. The idyllic pasture looked as if some monstrous ploughman, gone slightly insane, had taken to it with his tools in a concentrated act of random dissection. Thick furrows criss-crossed the soft green grass, leading to sundry components that had been cast off from the main body of the shuttle. Everywhere there was choking black smoke and the smell of hot metal. Amaryllis took a black lace handkerchief from her bodice and held it over her nose and mouth.

"Here, use this." The Doctor shoved something soft and plastic into her limp hand. She grasped it and saw that it was an oxygen mask. The Doctor was already wearing his, the straps flattening down his wild hair. Amaryllis pulled on her stinging her eyes.

"We must help." Amaryllis dashed forward, the Doctor trying to pull her back but failing.

"It's too dangerous!"

She ran forward to the creaking remains of the cockpit, but an intense blast of heat forced her back before she could reach the wreckage. She felt the Doctor's hand on her arm, pulling her back, saying, "It's too soon after the crash. There could still be a secondary explosion. Come away."

Amaryllis allowed herself to be led away from the hot wreckage by the Doctor, but as they proceeded, they saw ahead of them the body of a man in a space-suit, lying quite still, thrown clear of the cockpit by the final impact. Amaryllis tore herself free of the Doctor's grip once more and hurried over to the prone figure.

Before she had even turned the body over she said, "He's alive." Her alien abilities sensed the faint emotional traces from the man.

The Doctor hurried in behind her and turned the body. He knew that it was a risk to remove the space helmet without checking for spinal injuries, but the visor was cracked and there was smoke trapped inside the blackened headpiece. He carefully turned the helmet and twisted it free of it's housing with a loud hiss. Instantly, the man inside started coughing. His face was black with soot and his eyes were streaming.

The Doctor felt for a pulse - strong and steady. "Can you hear me? Do you have any broken bones? Are you in any...?"

Before the Doctor could finish his sentence, a deafening explosion filled the air, the sound wave drumming solidly on the Doctor and Amaryllis' ribcage. The engine, smouldering away in the burning copse, had suddenly exploded. The trees blasted outward in an immense ball of fire and the device of the engine was sent hurtling into the air like a cannonball. Such was it's weight, however, it didn't stay up there long, but came arcing downward in flames.

Toward the Doctor, Amaryllis and the Pilot. Seeing this, the Doctor quickly grabbed hold of the Pilot's shoulders and tried to start dragging him away from the carnage, but the plastic and metal suit was too heavy and, even with Amaryllis' help, he could not move him more than a few feet.

Frantically, the Doctor looked up, and was semi-relieved to see that the flaming engine's erratic course had swerved it away from them to an impact several hundred yards to their right. He shook Amaryllis by the shoulder and pointed. "It's going to miss us, but get down anyway, the fireball could be..."

They didn't get the chance to do anything before the engine struck the ground, shaking the pasture like a giant's footfall. It skipped several times like a giant fiery bowling ball, before smashing into the TARDIS and careering over an adjoining cliff into the valley below, sweeping the hapless time machine along with it.

"Doctor, the TARDIS!" gasped Amaryllis, eyes unbelieving, before she was thrown from her feet by a further massive explosion from down in the valley.

Clouds of acrid smoke rolled over the Doctor and Amaryllis as they clambered to their feet in the eerie silence that followed.

"Oh dear," said the Doctor.

Rosemary's voice sounded from behind the ajar door of Constance's room, interspersed by occasional muffled retorts:

"Yes Constance, I heard it. It sounded like it was coming from the direction of the valley near the poppy fields."

A muffled response.

"No, I don't know what it was. Do you think that I should go and take a look?"

Another inaudible comment.

"Dangerous? Oh, do you think so? This place has always seemed so peaceful. They've always left us alone here. After all, we're so off the beaten track."

A strangled, agitated vocalisation.

"No, no, they wouldn't. Not after all this time. No, it's a beastly thought. You simply mustn't worry yourself over that."

The handle turned, Rosemary's hand on the doorknob. "I'll see what I can spy from the landing window. It was probably just thunder or something." But her worried face looked massively unconvinced as she exited the bedroom.

Rosemary walked, on shaking legs, down the top flight of stairs to the landing window facing east, toward the direction of the noise. Looking out across the rolling countryside, she saw a thick of dense black smoke billowing up from the distant valley.

She called out to the other; "Oh, there's lot's of smoke, Constance. I think something has crashed out near the poppy field. It could be a falling star or... no, no, it couldn't be a spaceship. Not all the way out here. It just couldn't be."

Rosemary fastened on a headscarf reflected in the hall mirror and picked up a wicker basket containing bandages, antiseptic and any other household medicines that she could lay her hands on and hurried from the front door of the house without locking it behind her. She didn't know what use she could possibly be with such primitive medications if there were really people who had been damaged in some kind of spacecraft smash. They would need surgeons, anaesthetists and fully equipped hospitals, none of which there were on The Planet. In fact, there was very little on The Planet except The House, Rosemary and Constance.

Nothing at all, in fact. Until now.

Rosemary didn't get any further than the garden gate. It was as she was swinging open the rusty wooden gate that she first saw the strangers. There were three of them - a tall, thin man in a smart, dark suit - a girl, strangely contrasting in shades of black and scarlet, her skin white as alabaster - and, supported between them, an injured man in a tattered grey uniform, his face smeared with dark soot. Rosemary was momentarily staggered; these were the first others that she had seen in *how* long? Was anyone keeping count?

The thin man looked up, noticing her for the first time. His pleasant face cracked into a forced smile. "Hello. Sorry to intrude, but our friend here is injured and... well, you seem to be the only facility around here. I wonder if we could come inside and, well, maybe call for an ambulance or something...?"

Ambulance? Rosemary didn't know the meaning of the word, but - though she knew Constance would be disapproving - she wanted to help these strangers and their wounded comrade. She held the gate open for them and gestured into the house with an awkward gesture of her hand.

"P-please," she stammered despite herself, it was such an odd experience, conversing with others. "Take the poor man inside."

They carried the wounded fellow past her. The girl had a face like thunder, but the thin man smiled once more as he passed, which made Rosemary feel better. She watched them supporting the crash victim up the path and through the front door, before hurrying after them.

The Doctor and Amaryllis were laying the Pilot on the settee as Rosemary scuttled in through the front door, placing her basket on the coffee table and moving to watch them.

The pale girl seemed preoccupied with something. "Doctor, what about the TARDIS? " she hissed, placing a crocheted blanket over the Pilot.

The Doctor simply replied, "Sshh," and turned to Rosemary, smiling once more. She was beginning to find the smile a little disconcerting. "Now, about this ambulance...?"

"Ambulance?" Rosemary shook her head in incomprehension.

"Flying Doctor? Paramedic?"

No flicker of recognition crossed the face of the girl in the flower-print frock.

"Apothecary? Tree Surgeon?" The Doctor was grasping at straws now.

Rosemary shook her head. "There is nothing like that here."

"Well, what about in the closest city?" asked the Doctor, taking up the wicker basket and rummaging through the bandages and sundries.

"There is no city," Rosemary replied. "Not even a town or a village on this planet."

Amaryllis rounded angrily on Rosemary. "Surely you can't be suggesting that there's only you and this house on this entire planet?"

The Doctor read the blank expression on the young woman's face. "I think that's exactly what she's trying to tell us, Amaryllis. She is alone here."

"Oh, not alone," smiled Rosemary awkwardly. "There's Constance."

"Constance?" queried the Doctor.

She explained, "An old lady, I look after her. She's very, very ill and unable to take care of herself."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," empathised the Doctor. "It's terrible when they can't do things for themselves anymore."

"Doctor, " interrupted Amaryllis, disturbed at how he was suddenly turning into Alan Bennett. "I think this man here has a slightly more pressing medical condition."

"Nonsense," dismissed the Doctor. "I examined the fellow thoroughly back in the fields. He's terribly bruised and in severe shock but nothing's broken internally. In the absence of a more qualified medical opinion, I should prescribe lots of bed rest and - ah yes, hot sweet tea! " His face lit up as if he had just discovered penicillin.

"I'll put the kettle on," half-smiled Rosemary.

"Mine's white with two sugars," added the Doctor.

Rosemary paused momentarily in the kitchen doorway, then proceeded in to stoke up the kitchen range. She heard the authoritative voice of the man call through to her from the sitting room as she heard him raking up the coals in the grate. "I'm the Doctor, by the way. No, that that kind of doctor, unfortunately under the circumstances. My dour companion is called Amaryllis." She could almost hear the girl scowling at this comment. "I'm not entirely sure who this injured young fellow is, but he was the only survivor of a space wreck in yonder valley. Nasty business."

"Rosemary," called the young woman from the kitchen.

"No, just tea bags will do," came the Doctor's reply. "I can't be doing with all that fancy..."

"No, no," she interrupted. "That's my name, Rosemary."

"How lovely, that was my mother's name," called the Doctor - adding, after a pause, "...or was it Beryl?"

Rosemary smiled to herself. She quite liked this young man. It was nice to have visitors for a change. She had been here so long, alone with a sick old woman. She hoped that they decided to stay for a while. Picking the empty kettle from the hob, Rosemary turned to fill it from the kitchen sink. She jumped with shock as she almost walked into Amaryllis, standing in the doorway.

"Pillows," the pale girl spat the word. "He needs something to support his head. Do you have any pillows that we could use?"

"Certainly," gasped Rosemary, catching her breath. The girl unnerved her. She stepped through the kitchen door and pointed up the stairs. "My bedroom is up there. There is a stack of spare pillows in the cupboard."

"Thank you," Amaryllis' thin red lips issued the word without feeling, then she slipped away from the kitchen. Amaryllis climbed the stairs and looked around. Ahead of her there lay a bedroom, its door ajar. This must be the one, she supposed, and reached out for the handle.

Suddenly, Rosemary was in front of her. She must have run up the stairs, she was out of breath and Amaryllis felt cold fear in her mind. Fear and suspicion, but the rest was clouded. Somehow this woman was someone with experience at disguising her emotions.

"No, not that one," gasped Rosemary. "That's Constance's room. She's very sick and it wouldn't do to have you disturbing her." She pulled the door closed, and locked it with a mortis key she produced from her pocket.

"That's the room," Rosemary pointed to the next room along.

Amaryllis nodded and headed toward the indicated chamber. Rosemary waited until the alien girl had disappeared into the room before the kettle drew her back down the kitchen.

The bedroom was as Amaryllis had expected, lacy and lilac-scented. A modest single bed was shoved almost ashamedly into one corner of the room leaving a mighty floor space. There was a dresser mounted with an ornate ovoid mirror, with unmarked bottles and atomisers on its surface, the mirror was old and slightly scratched - it had observed much.

Amaryllis moved to the wardrobe, similarly Edwardian, and eased open the rounded double doors. No more than five dresses hung within, rattling about inside the sizeable box, each of them a flowery print like the one Rosemary wore, except for one, which was blue Gingham.

Below stood two extra pairs of shoes, one an ankle-strapped sandal and the other a pair of sturdy walking boots, both worn but scrupulously cleaned. And next to the shoes, neatly stacked, were the pillows - crisp and new, as if never used, and never intended to be used. Amaryllis drew one of the soft feather pillows from the pile. It was as plump and perfect as the day it was made. She imagined a pair of plump roosters nestling in the pantry, still warm.

Amaryllis did not like this house. Something about it disturbed her.

Having filled the teapot, Rosemary turned to place the kettle back on the stove. She was once more startled to find, this time the Doctor, standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with one arm above his head.

"You gave me such a start, Doctor," gasped Rosemary.

"I do apologise," said the Doctor sincerely. "I was just wondering... you say there are no cities here? This isn't Earth after all then?"

"Goodness me, no," replied Rosemary, busying herself placing the teapot on a tray and arranging china cups and saucers (she had had to dig extra cups out from a box in the very back of the kitchen cupboard). "This is a planetoid on the very outer edge of known space. No one here because it's so far from the trade routes. It doesn't have a name even. Constance came here because she loved the climate and the solitude. She owns it."

"She owns the planet?" the Doctor was incredulous.

"It's not unheard of," Rosemary seemed quite affronted. "She was quite a wealthy person. A noblewoman on her home planet."

"What was her home planet?" asked the Doctor.

Rosemary shook her head. "Oh, I don't remember. Some little place. I'm from Earth though. I designed this cottage. It's nice, isn't it?"

"Splendid," smiled the Doctor. "Erm, I don't wish to pry but... what exactly is wrong with your Constance?"

The colour drained from Rosemary's face, she was visibly shaken. "Oh, I couldn't possibly..." she blustered. "Constance would go berserk if she thought that I had... no, no, I couldn't ever betray such a confidence!"

The Doctor placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'm terribly sorry," he apologised. "If I'd known that it was like that, I would never... please accept my humble apologies."

Rosemary nodded, a touch of sadness in her eyes. "The tea's getting cold," she said.

Amaryllis paused outside the door that Rosemary had locked, the pillow tucked under her arm. She was about to bypass it and keep on going down the stairs, when curiosity overtook her. She saw the large keyhole in the ancient mortis lock and was unable to resist the urge to satisfy her curious streak regarding the mysterious Constance. Placing the pillow to one side, she kneeled by the door, bringing her eye up to the cold metal of the keyhole; her heavy lashes brushed against the lock. Inside, she could see a bed; not a modest little one like that in Rosemary's room, but a mighty four-poster with white silk drapes. The bed was turned away from the door, facing an open window so that the old woman could watch the trees and birds outside. Amaryllis could not see the occupant of the bed because of angle, but there was a bedside table against which was leant a large staff capped with an ornate design that seemed somehow not to fit in with the Old England quaint of the rest of the house - it was some sort of head, wearing a crown - humanoid, and yet...

Amaryllis jumped back from the keyhole. There was suddenly a frantic twisting from the previously unmoving figure in the bed. Writhing. Thrashing. And there was a feeling too, deep within Amaryllis' alien senses. A feeling like... fear... expectation... anticipation... pain!

The sudden white flare that burst out from the bed and filled the room threw Amaryllis back from the keyhole for a second time, scorching her retina. She sat there, rubbing her eyes, as a needlepoint of light stabbed out from the keyhole for thirty long seconds then cut suddenly out.

There was a mournful sigh from the locked room. Amaryllis picked up the pillow and fled down the stairs. When Amaryllis reached the foot of the stairs, she screeched to a halt. The scene in the sitting thrown room was one of almost normality. Rosemary sat pouring tea from a pot on the coffee table, the Pilot dozed fitfully on the sofa, blanket-covered and the Doctor stood in front of the fire, one hand in pocket, the other stroking his chin thoughtfully as he examined the portrait in oils that hung over the fireplace.

How could she tell the Doctor what had just happened with Rosemary there?

"Ah, Amaryllis," said the Doctor, noticing her on the stairs. "Come and take a look at this, it's absolutely exquisite."

"Doctor, there's...." began Amaryllis, abruptly recognising the value of discretion and eliminating the panic from her voice. "Erm, do you think that we could have a word in private, perhaps?"

The Doctor, however, was engrossed in the portrait. "The line of the brush-strokes. The creative use of colour..."

Amaryllis hurried to the Doctor's side, grasping his arm with some urgency. Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "Doctor, there's something not right about this house. Can't you feel it?"

"And, do you know," continued the Doctor heedlessly, "I can't help but think that I recognise the subject. I know I've seen her somewhere before and I just can't... Ami, you're hurting my arm."

"We have to leave here," hissed the pale girl.

"Don't be silly," the Doctor spoke as if to a bothersome child. "The TARDIS is at the bottom of a ravine, or had you forgotten? All right, so she might be indestructible, but it would seem like a good idea to let that blazing engine cool down just a little before we go near it, don't you think? Mmm?"

"There's something in this house that wasn't meant to live," there was deadly earnest in Amaryllis' eyes as she spoke. "Something with which we should not interfere."

The Doctor smiled. "But I like to interfere. Besides, there's nothing in this house except the two of us, the pilot, Rosemary and..." The Doctor's face suddenly lit up, like a tall light bulb, Constance!" he glittered.

The Doctor turned to Rosemary, pointing to the portrait with a skimpy finger. "Rosemary, this wouldn't be a photograph of Constance by any chance, would it?"

Rosemary looked up from adding milk to the cups of tea. She smiled a nervous half-smile, Why yes, Doctor. But when she was much younger, of course."

"Of course," agreed the Doctor with pleasantry.

Then he turned toward Amaryllis with his back between her and Rosemary. The pleasantness fell from his face, which looked suddenly grim. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Ami," he whispered.

Amaryllis was amazed at this sudden volte-face. "You believe me? But what...?"

The Doctor grasped her shoulders and turned her toward the portrait. He finger flicked forth like the tongue of a snake, briefly drawing attention to a complex latticework brooch on the breast of the statuesque woman in the painting.

"What is it?" asked Amaryllis.

The Doctor replied in hushed tones. "The Triple Helix - ancient symbol of the Gallifreyan aristocracy."

Amaryllis stared at the complex metalwork. "Then she... Constance... is a Time Lord, I mean, a Time Lady?"

The Doctor nodded. "A very old and important one. Too old to be here and now. Gallifreyans love their secrets and this house is full of them. Personally, I've never shared the taste - I much prefer answers to questions. I think it's time you distracted Rosemary whilst I have a swift, but professional, snoop."

"I'd recommend the master bedroom," said Amaryllis, suddenly frowning. "But how can I distract Rosemary?"

The Doctor smiled and raised his eyebrows.

"Brrr!" exclaimed the Doctor, breezing into the middle of the room and hugging himself in an overly theatrical manner. "I think the night is drawing in a little. Can't you feel that chill?"

"Tea?" offered Rosemary with a smile.

"Splendid," said the Doctor, accepting the offered cup. "But I really think that I should get that fire stoked up a bit to warm our injured friend here. Rosemary, if you could show Amaryllis where the wood is kept..."

Rosemary rose to her feet, brushing down her dress. "That's alright, Doctor. I'll fetch it."

"Nonsense, Amaryllis'll help. Won't you, Amaryllis?" The Doctor shoved her forward with such force that it elicited a tiny cry.

"My pleasure," said Amaryllis tartly, turning on the Doctor with narrowed eyes as she backed out of the room after Rosemary.

"Stall," mouthed the Doctor.

The Doctor watched Rosemary and Amaryllis leave the sitting room and stood there beaming, tea in hand, until the front door latch had clicked into place. Then, the tea was down, his eyes were all around the room and the Doctor was up the stairs in two or three lanky bounds.

Crouching outside the door at the top of the stairs as Amaryllis had before him, the Doctor put his eye to the keyhole. But he saw no thrashing patron, no blinding brilliance. Only the gently wafting net curtains over the bed turned toward the window. His eye fell on the cane with its carved wooden 'head'.

"The bust of Rassilon," hissed the Doctor to himself. "Curiouser and curiouser."

Reaching into his capacious pockets, he pulled out an intricate device of black metal. French picklock - eminently more use on this kind of old mortis lock than the sonic screwdriver, when it came to picking mechanical locks was about as much use as a battenburg cake.

The Doctor slipped the picklock into the keyhole and with a twist, a turn, and a rousing CLICK, opened the device that held the door firm. Rising to his feet, the Doctor slipped the picklock back into his pocket. Then, he knocked firmly on the hardened oak - this was a lady's room, after all was said and done.

"Knock, knock," said the Doctor, not without some degree of nervousness. "Hope you're decent in there, because I'm coming in." And in he went.

The room was cool and smelled faintly of lavender. There was a certain sparseness to it, save for the mighty four-poster, turned as ever toward the slightly open window. From the doorway, the Doctor was unable to see the bed's occupant.

"Erm," the Doctor felt suddenly intrusive, as if he had unwittingly wandered into the women's changing rooms. "I thought you might, er, like your window closing. The night is closing in and it's getting rather..." His throat dried as he edged around the bed. "Can't you feel that chill?"

A hand moved from under the covers and grasped the wooden cane defensively. It was the hand of an old lady, gnarled and twisted, but adorned with a large jewelled ring. The Doctor recognised the ring as he had recognised the Triple Helix brooch.

"Don't be scared," the Doctor addressed the agitated hand as he moved further around the bed. I'm like you. I'm a Time Lord." But this seemed to cause only further agitation.

Finally, the Doctor could procrastinate no longer. He hurried the last few steps to the foot of the bed and stared into the frightened, rheumy eyes of its occupant.

He did not recognise the old lady who lay there.

"Greetings, Lady Elstria," bowed the Doctor.

Amaryllis had done her best to distract Rosemary in the woodshed. She had accidentally knocked over the pale of wood shavings, and then insisted on clearing it up. In doing so, she had pulled the head off the broom and proved completely useless at re-affixing it, eventually leaving the task to Rosemary. Then she had dropped the wood that she had been attempting to carry. Twice. Finally she had insisted on imparting to Rosemary the only joke she knew; the one about the three Alpha Centaurians and the deep-space pilot."...So he says, 'If you like that sort of thing, I'll meet you in the Spacer's bar in ten minutes!'" Amaryllis forced herself to laugh enough for the two of them at this quip, as Rosemary obviously wasn't making the effort.

"Who are you people?" asked Rosemary, her face suddenly adopting the aspect of thunder.

Amaryllis feigned innocence. "I beg your pardon?"

"That friend of yours seemed very interested in my painting," the woman was edging toward the door, Amaryllis noted. "And you've been making every effort to keep me out of the way, haven't you?"

Amaryllis felt the suspicion that was emanating from the other in waves. She tried to be reassuring, which wasn't really her forte; "Look, we're just space travellers. We happened to get caught up in a little accident here and..." She was losing it. "Well, the TARDIS was..."

"TARDIS?" Rosemary was appalled. "You're Time Lords? "

"No, no," denied Amaryllis, raising her hands in a placating manner (she had seen the Doctor do that). "Well, the Doctor's a... but I'm..."

Too little, too late. Rosemary had turned and fled.

Amaryllis cursed and kicked over the bucket of wood shavings.

The woman was old. Very old. Her thin, wrinkled body was drowning in the waves of her silken high-collared nightdress. Her hair was a spartan silver wisp and liver spots clung to her cheeks and hands.

Her teeth were perfect, noted the Doctor as she spoke, as if they had been allowed less time to age than the rest of her. "Who sent you?" her voice was surprisingly strident.

"No-one sent me," replied the Doctor. "In fact, I doubt there's another Time Lord in existence who even knows you're still alive."

The old lady laughed. The laugh turned into a rattling cough. The Doctor took a step forward, but she waved him away. "Oh, they know. They know. Those brutes at Stellar Dispatch."

"They call themselves the Celestial Intervention Agency now," corrected the Doctor. "They haven't been Stellar Dispatch since long before I was born."

"Still the same manipulative scum as ever, I'll warrant," spat the old woman, ancient hatreds rising to the surface. "So many millennia. So many millennia."

The Doctor shook his head in confusion. "What happened to you? "

Before she could answer, there was a commotion as Rosemary burst into the room, Amaryllis not far behind. "Don't you dare touch her!" screamed the younger woman. "Why can't you just leave her alone after all this time?"

Amaryllis hugged the doorframe, gasping, "I tried to stop her Doctor, but she's so fast! "

"It doesn't matter," dismissed the Doctor. "Amaryllis, come in and meet Lady Elstria - the first lady of Gallifrey, you might say."

Rosemary collapsed at the side of the bed, hugging the old lady's withered arm.

"I tried to stop them, Constance. Truly I did. I do my best by you, Constance, you know I always do."

Constance patted Rosemary comfortingly on the shoulder. "Of course you do, Rosemary. You're a good girl."

The Doctor moved forward, his hands on the foot of the bed. "I promise you we're not here to harm you. I assure that nobody sent us. As soon as our friend downstairs is well, we'll be on our way once more. Please forgive my intrusion... I was curious."

Amaryllis moved to the Doctor's side. "Doctor, who is she?"

The Doctor looked to the old lady, as if seeking her permission to tell. She shook her silver locks gently and with a kindly smile. The Doctor began: "Amaryllis, you are looking at one of the biggest mysteries in the history of my planet. Lady Elstria, the Time Lord equivalent of Earth's Lord Lucan, if you will. She was the most important and popular figure of the time - millennia ago, we're talking about here. She was the betrothed of Rassilon, the founder of our Time Lord civilisation, the revered and powerful engineer who collapsed a black hole and created the Eye of Harmony whose radiations are the source of all our power. After the creation of the Eye, Rassilon was treated like a king, the supreme ruler of Gallifrey, and his royal wedding to Lady Elstria was to be a state occasion unrivalled in all history."

"What happened?" asked Amaryllis.

"Ah, therein lies the mystery," began the Doctor. "A week before the ceremony, Lady Elstria simply vanished off the face of the planet. There were plenty of historical theories of course; that the CIA had disposed of her as a possible distraction to Rassilon's government; that she had eloped with a high ranking Prydonian cardinal; even that Rassilon himself had killed her, but there was never any real answer."

"Gallifreyan society was thrown into turmoil, some histories say Rassilon went mad and that this was the beginnings of the Dark Time. Certainly there's little recorded history of the time to suggest what really occurred."

There was a gentle chuckle from Constance. She looked up, through the Doctor, as if recalling long distant memories. "I heard the theories, here in my exile. There were visitors in the early days. They provided me with some wry amusement in the course of my pain."

"Exile?" queried the Doctor. "Pain?"

"No-one ever guessed the real reason," began the old lady. "That it was all just an accident. A stupid genetic blunder. My beloved Rassilon. He was such a proud man. He didn't want to be seen, as a Lord of Time, to be marrying a mortal Gallifreyan. There were few Time Lords then; it was a matter of great privilege. Only direct exposure to the Eye of Harmony could begin the change in gene structure that gave the gifts of time travel and regeneration. But we were children playing with a chemistry set - we didn't realise that not all genotypes were compatible with the process. Someone had to suffer that the discovery could be made. It was to be me."

The Doctor frowned, horrified at the thought. "Your body rejected the new genetic codes?"

Constance shook her frail head. "Not exactly. The genes misfired; my body produced a constant stream of regeneratives. I was unable to prevent the changes. Constant, debilitating changes that were wracking my body at all times. I was a freak and an invalid - no use to man nor beast... and certainly no bride for the majestic Rassilon!"

"Let me guess," chipped in the Doctor. "The CIA, or Stellar Dispatch as they were then, thought it best to simply sweep you under the metaphorical carpet rather than further embarrass the state with tales of genetic misconduct linked directly to the house of Rassilon."

Constance nodded. "They terraformed this remote planetoid using the stellar manipulator and me up here, where I could no longer be an embarrassment, with Rosemary here as my only companion." Rosemary squeezed the hand of her elderly ward and the two exchanged warm, wistful smiles.

The Doctor sat on the edge of the bed and regarded the strangely misplaced pair. "And you never saw Rassilon or Gallifrey again?"

"No," replied Constance sadly, head bowed.

"And these regenerations, they've continued steadily all this time? These many millennia?"

"Yes. They're less frequent now, but the ageing is just as rapid. I would say that I average about three changes a day. The turmoil is every bit as painful as when it first occurred and I cannot die. I can never..." Suddenly, Constance loosened her grip on the wooden cane and it fell to the floor with a clatter.
The Doctor stood up and hurried to the other side of the bed. Rosemary stood also, but seemed unmoved by the strange changes that seemed to be suddenly hitting the old woman. Her body was bathed in a strange incandescent glow that seemed to sweep across her skin in waves, smoothing out the wrinkles, refreshing the skin and restructuring the bone. The hair grew back, long and dark blonde, cascading over the thin shoulders.

"This is what I saw before," exclaimed Amaryllis.

"Regeneration," confirmed the Doctor.

Rosemary observed impassively. "She must undergo this several times every day. The body becomes young but ages rapidly over the next few hours. It is very painful."

"I know," nodded the Doctor, turning away in the knowledge that there was nothing he could do to help.

At that moment, there was a mighty crash from downstairs and the tinkling of breaking china.

"Now what?" said the Doctor.

A sudden realisation hit Amaryllis. "The Pilot," she cried and hurried past the Doctor, out of the room and down the stairs. The Doctor looked at Constance, then at Rosemary.

"Go," said Rosemary. "There's nothing you can do here."

"I know," replied the Doctor and followed Amaryllis from the room.

The Pilot was sprawled on the floor next to the overturned coffee table; face down in a bed of spilled sugar and broken china. As the Doctor arrived, Amaryllis was just turning him over. His face was twisted in a sneer of pain.

Amaryllis looked up at the Doctor, a mask of concern on her face. "What's wrong with him?"

"Delayed shock," diagnosed the Doctor before even reaching him. He kneeled down by the prostrate figure and ripped open the front of his flight suit. "Must've been a heavy blow to the upper chest. His

heart's stopped..."

"You said he would be alright!" spat Amaryllis.

The Doctor was flustered as he examined the man's torso. "There was no bruise. How could I possibly have known..." He stopped mid-sentence to deliver a heavy blow to the man's chest with the heel of his fist.

The hollow thud made Amaryllis jump back in surprise. The Doctor put his ear to the man's chest, but raised his head, shaking his wild hair.

"He can't be dead," whined the girl.

"He's not dead! " insisted the Doctor. "If only I had the TARDIS. There must be something in this house I can use to start his heart again!"

But the look of utter futility on the Doctor's face told Amaryllis that he knew there was nothing he could do to save the man's life.

"STEP BACK!" The voice boomed from the top of the stairs. The Doctor and Amaryllis both looked up as the room became suffused with white light.

It was Constance. Lady Elstria. Still bathed in white light like a renaissance saint and led by the hand by Rosemary, she stood at the top of the stairs, young and upright, yet somehow enfeebled and fighting the pain every inch of the way.

"She's still regenerating," exclaimed the Doctor in amazement, steering Amaryllis away from the Pilot, just as Rosemary steered Constance towards him.

"THE REGENERATIVE PROPERTIES OF MY BODY ARE UNCONTROLLED AND UNCONTROLLABLE, " echoed the voice of the glowing Time Lady. "I MAY BE ABLE TO TRANSFER THOSE PROPERTIES TO ANOTHER BODY."

The Doctor said, "But you'll disrupt your own regenerative process. Anything could happen."

"YES," agreed Constance. "I COULD LIVE. I COULD DIE. THE UNPREDICTABILITY IS MY HEART'S DESIRE. THIS IS THE LAST AND ONLY WISH OF YOUR LADY ELSTRIA, DOCTOR. THIS IS WHAT I WANT. NOW, STAND BACK."

The Doctor led Amaryllis into the kitchen. "Down here," he said. "And close your eyes, this could be a little bit..."

Everything in the room went white. A blast of pure brilliance shot through reality without any sound to accompany it. Through shaded eyes, the Doctor saw Rosemary hurled backward into a chair as Constance, now virtually indistinguishable in the whiteness, laid her hands on the body of the Pilot. There was a further blast of retina scorching light, then normality.

The Doctor got to his feet and helped Amaryllis up. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I think so," said Amaryllis weakly. "I could see through my eyelids. What happened?"

The Doctor let go of her and hurried into the sitting room. The body of Constance lay by the Pilot. She was an old woman once more. She was dead. The Doctor knelt by her and closed her eyelids. She looked as much at peace as she had in the portrait, millennia ago.

"Is she...?" asked his companion from behind him.

The Doctor nodded. "It was her only release. I think it was what she wanted."

There was a groan as the Pilot began to regain consciousness. The scratches and burns on his face and hands were gone and his skin was as pink as that of a newborn baby. Even his hair, previously thin and greying, was now lush and dark. The mutant regenerative cells of Constance's body had somehow renewed the Pilot's ailing form, but at the cost of disrupting her own cycle and ending her life.

The Pilot yawned, as if waking from a long sleep. "What's... where am I?"

The Doctor smiled at the Pilot. "Consider this the luckiest day of your life," he said, before getting to his feet and leaving all the explaining to Amaryllis. He could hear her vainly attempting to do so as he crossed the room.

He found Rosemary in her favourite armchair. The discharge of energy had short-circuited her neural cortex and her head lay to one side, a discreet gash in her neck blackened and sparking. She could never have existed without Constance, she being the reason that Rosemary was manufactured. The Doctor supposed that he could have taken the friendly android with him in the TARDIS, but she would

never have been truly content. Perhaps her demise was, in it's own small way, as premeditated as that of her mistress.

The Doctor closed Rosemary's eyes too. He would bury them in the garden, he decided. Side by side, outside their little home. There was plenty of time before it was safe to return to the TARDIS.

The Doctor sighed and put his hands in his pockets, observing for a short while the portrait of Lady Elstria - First Lady of Gallifrey. To him, she would always be Constance.

The Doctor turned to Amaryllis and the Pilot. He was smiling gently as he clapped his hands together and said, "Right, who's for a cup of tea?"

Time Bomb

by Selina Lock and Kathryn Sullivan

The whirling journey finally ended. She felt firm ground beneath her boots once more and opened her eyes to utilitarian grey walls. She appeared to be outside a storage facility. There were barrels and crates stacked in multicoloured rows and roads leading off in every direction.

The air *smelled*. Not the subtle scents of 'freshners, but *odours*, so strong that she could almost taste some of them. Was this what it was like to be outside?

She shook her head, redirecting her focus. She had little time to complete her mission and get back before her absence- and her interference- was noticed.

She glanced down at the time ring and was vaguely comforted by the indicators. She pushed the band further up her arm, then pulled out the locator and activated it. Swinging the locator about until the beeping intensified, she nodded and started in that direction.

The spaceport was new enough that several landing pads were actually open fields, and the few warehouses were prefabs. Khamsin looked up at a distant ship that appeared to have been attacked by tie-dye artists. Looking down just in time to side-step a puddle, she wondered again how the Doctor managed to keep his tuxedo looking as if it had just been pressed. In sharp contrast to his hair, which seemed to be standing on end again. 'Don't let's wander too far,' she said. 'Anton promised to give us a tour.'

The Doctor quickened his step, seemingly heading for the stacks of crates outside one warehouse. 'Another tour?! We've seen the countryside...'

'Because the TARDIS landed on a hill,' Khamsin retorted.

'...the mine...'

Khamsin scowled and muttered, 'Still don't see how they can justify damaging the planet just to get the funding to move here.' She hurried to catch him up and continued in her normal voice, 'The hill was next to the mine.'

'...the offices and first homesteads of the new colony, talked to people...'

Khamsin grinned at the memory. 'Pretty good, that, passing us off as from the next over colony world. How do you do that?'

'It's a gift,' the Doctor said modestly.

Khamsin rolled her eyes. 'Yeah, and now he wants to ask us how we handled things in *our* colony.'

The Doctor stopped in his tracks. His look of dismay was almost comical. 'Oh. We can leave now. Or do you want to wait a day or two until the colony ship arrives?'

Khamsin caught sight of the large bins near the warehouse. From the stencilled labels, these were where the mined ores were stored. Walking over to the nearest, she tapped it thoughtfully and looked up toward the distant ships. 'Doctor, what's to stop someone from raiding this place?'

The Doctor had pulled the TARDIS key from his pocket. 'Raid?' He twirled the key on its chain. 'For what? The crops are only now being planted.'

Khamsin rapped the bin for emphasis. 'This. Other rare minerals, oil, wildlife... oh, I don't know, whatever those trader ships-' she waved in the ships' direction- 'are interested in. What's to stop someone from taking these before the colony ship arrives?'

The Doctor mused. 'Well, Malahand 7 is pretty far on the rim. There are what you might call space police, but it would take some time for them to get here. Why?'

'Just something Anton said. He was worried about some disappearing equipment.'

The Doctor brightened. 'A spot of detecting? We could stay long enough to investigate...' He suddenly stopped and stared behind Khamsin.

She turned and saw a tall, dark-haired woman approaching. The woman's attention was on a small

device in her hand, which flashed multicoloured lights as she walked.

The Doctor abruptly moved, pulling Khamsin with him behind the huge bin.

'Hey! What's the matter?' Khamsin protested.

The Doctor made a shushing sound and pointed to his wrist. 'She's wearing a time ring.'

Khamsin looked cautiously around the corner of the bin. The tall woman was still absorbed in her device, her short dark hair falling forward to hide her features. Her clothing struck Khamsin as a sort of wealthy class' idea of what to wear on safari. The boots looked useful, but the blouse flowed in filmy layers, as did the divided skirt. The only thing that didn't scream wealth and elegance was the blocky over-sized band sliding down her arm.

She returned to the Doctor. 'That clunky bracelet? So?'

The Doctor looked worried. 'You don't understand. She's wearing a time ring. The only people who have that technology are Time Lords.' He saw that she didn't understand and added, 'From Gallifrey. My home.'

'Okay, so she's from Gallifrey. So why are we hiding?'

The Doctor glanced around the bin, then ducked back into cover. 'Why is she here? Time Lords seldom leave Gallifrey.'

'*You* did.'

The Doctor directed a look at her.

Khamsin had been travelling with him long enough not to be fazed by that look. 'Well, you did.'

The Doctor grinned wryly, then started brooding again. 'The question is, has she come here because *we're* here?'

Khamsin was beginning to suspect him of being paranoid. 'How would the Time Lords know that you're here?'

The Doctor's expression was a mixture of anger and resentment. 'They have their ways.'

They fell silent as the woman passed their hiding place. She was still intent on the small device she held. As the faint beeps and blips from the device faded, the Doctor silently gestured at Khamsin. They followed the woman, moving from cover to cover.

'She's not heading for the TARDIS,' the Doctor commented as they neared the centre of the settlement.

'And she doesn't seem to be looking for you. Or *at* anyone, for that matter.' Khamsin watched as the woman crossed a street as if the oncoming flyer didn't exist. 'What *is* that thing?'

'A locator of some type. But what is it locating?' The Doctor stopped in the middle of the street to look at the surrounding buildings. A pushcart and two pedestrians dodged around him, and then the Doctor was on the move again. He stopped in front of a display of imported fruit as the woman abruptly halted at an intersection and studied her locator again.

'Khamsin!'

Khamsin turned at the call and saw Anton standing by his flyer, waving at her. She tugged at the Doctor's sleeve. 'Doctor.'

The Doctor was totally oblivious. She tried a few more times to get his attention, and then gave up. 'Doctor, I'll just be talking with Anton.'

The Doctor was intent on their prey. 'Fine, fine. You know, whatever she's looking for must be in the main offices. She seems to be heading that way.'

Khamsin sighed and went over to join the young colonist, leaving the Doctor to follow the woman.

Anton leant against his flyer and watched Khamsin ambling over to him. A slight smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. She looked like a bright flame against the utilitarian background of warehouses, shops and work sheds. Her long, wavy red hair streamed over her shoulders, only constrained by the black velvet peaked cap atop her head. It was her hair and clothes that he'd first noticed when she'd been walking through the colony headquarters a few days earlier. The purple boots with flowers painted on them, the blue trousers- that she'd called 'flares'- and the embroidered white top were so sumptuous compared to the durable brown and grey overalls worn by most colonists.

Khamsin reached the flyer and grinned up at him, her blue eyes shining with energy. 'Anton, glad

you found us. I thought the Doctor was going to cut our visit short and I'd miss having a nose around.'

'You don't think I'd let you slip away without the grand tour, did you? Anyway, I was hoping to discuss a few things with the Doctor. Is he coming?'

Khamsin glanced back to where she'd left the Doctor and saw his back disappear behind some off-duty miners. 'Afraid not, he seems to have spotted someone he recognises. So you'll just have to burden me with your worries. Where to first in our Magical Mystery Tour?'

Anton frowned slightly at the question as he ushered Khamsin into the flyer. 'Magical Mystery Tour, isn't that an old Earth legend involving some kind of insect and a walrus?'

Khamsin raised her eyebrows slightly and turned her head to hide a grin. 'Err, old Earth legend? Yeah, something like that.'

They squashed into the cramped interior of the flyer. Anton efficiently checked the controls and revved the engine for take-off. He looked back over his shoulder. 'I'm taking you to my favourite spot on the planet; just wait until you see it.' His boyish enthusiasm made him seem younger and less serious as they left the spaceport behind them.

Although he was certain the other Gallifreyan's goal was the administration building, the Doctor didn't let the gap between them widen, even though he had to dodge around several groups of excited people discussing some device that had been found. He put on a burst of speed and was close enough to overhear when she stopped a small group of miners leaving the building.

'Where is the device?'

'We dropped it off with...' one miner started, when a light-haired woman interrupted with 'And why do you want to know, eh?'

The Time Lady looked down at her. 'It is most important that no one attempt to tamper with it.'

The miners glanced among themselves, and the woman responded suspiciously, 'Oh? And what is it, exactly?'

'Death.'

The miners stared at her, but the Gallifreyan merely glanced again at her locator. 'Now then, with whom did you "drop it"?'

Another miner pointed at the door. 'Scientists. Lab One.'

The Time Lady nodded and continued inside. The miners stayed clustered by the door. 'Do you believe her?'

'Dunno. She seemed so certain.'

'She's trying to scare us. That thing must have been buried for hundreds of years. It's probably worth a fortune,' the first woman decided.

The Doctor edged past the group and into the building.

Once inside, he looked quickly around the empty lobby. The colony was in the midst of transition from strictly mining to a full-fledged settlement. The rest of the colonists were arriving any day, and the mildly chaotic state of the offices reflected the excitement.

The security point was empty of its usual guard, but he could hear a great deal of shouting down one corridor. Shaking his head, he followed the racket. He had gone only a short way down the hall when a door slammed around an intersecting corner. In the resulting silence he could hear footsteps approaching. The Doctor hurriedly tried the closest doors.

He found one office unlocked and slipped inside. The shadows of two guards passed by outside the glass, and he cautiously opened the door.

'So, are you going to tell the Administrator about this?' the first guard asked.

'He's got enough on his plate already with the landing. And all the scientists are studying that thing the miners brought in. She'll just have to wait.'

The guards continued on their way back to the security station, and the Doctor emerged from the office and tiptoed down the hallway. It wasn't hard to locate where the Time Lord was being kept—he could hear her shouts from where he stood. The guards had chosen an office with a solid door to secure their 'guest'. He decided a bit of interrogation might be in order. After all, she wouldn't know

he was a Time Lord as well as long as a door was between them.

'Let me out!' The door shook with a sudden 'bang' as if she had kicked it. The handle rattled. 'Do you hear me? Let me out immediately!' She lapsed into muttered Gallifreyan. 'Of all the short-sighted, narrow-minded, suspicious creatures...' She pounded on the door again. 'Is there anyone out there? I'm trying to help you!'

The Doctor leaned against the wall beside the door. 'Why should anyone believe you?'

'Is someone there? I demand you let me out!'

The Doctor looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. Typical Time Lord arrogance. 'I don't respond very well to demands. Why don't you try explaining why you were put there in the first place, hmm?'

'There isn't time! Look, the device the miners found is extremely dangerous. Handled the wrong way, it could explode.'

The Doctor straightened. 'Did you tell them that?'

'Of course. But they didn't believe me.'

The Doctor leaned closer to the door. 'And why should I?'

She sighed. 'You probably won't believe this either, but I'm...from the future. That's how I know. That's why I came to this planet. To warn people.'

The Doctor looked at the door in surprise. 'That's why you came here? To help them?'

'Yes! Are you going to open this door, or are you going to stand there talking until the device explodes?'

The Doctor shook his head and fumbled about in his pockets. 'You know, if you are going to interfere in other peoples' business the first thing you need to learn is how to escape from a cell.'

He pulled out his sonic screwdriver and aimed it at the lock.

Khamsin lay back in the lush purple grass. Lenny and Susan would have loved this place. They'd have been busy claiming that it had the right resonances, pitching the tents and rolling a joint to enjoy the atmosphere even more. Khamsin automatically started to reach for her bag to get one out before remembering that the Doctor had advised against lighting up in front of the locals. Thinking about the friends she'd left back on 1970's Earth reminded her with a twinge of guilt that her parents still wouldn't have a clue where she was. The guilt was quickly followed by the usual anger at the memory of their last parting. To distract herself, she rolled over on to her front and looked around for Anton.

She spotted him leaning against a tree trunk, gazing off over the landscape, worry lines creasing his expression slightly. He looked quite cute with his lean, muscular body and short dark hair. She usually preferred long hair, but his eyes made up for any other shortcomings, dark brown, emanating warmth, and oh, so very serious looking. She'd enjoyed his company and the gentle flirting over the last few days. She was used to getting male attention back home but the Doctor didn't seem to be wired that way.

She decided to indulge in some light teasing. 'Ummm, this is so much better than that grotty settlement of yours.'

'Grotty settlement? Grotty! That is pure luxury compared to the hole we lived in on Earth. Anyway, your colony's been established a year; you come back next year and see how much we'll have done by then.' He sighed. 'Though, you're right, I'd rather be out here than back at base.'

'So what were you brooding about?'

'Um, I was just thinking about that missing mining equipment I mentioned. I don't understand why anyone would want it. Unless one of the miners is trying to stir up trouble. I know some of them definitely resent being here.'

'Why?'

'Not all of them are colonists, working to pay off the price of settling here. Some are contract workers, and they don't understand why this is designated a low technology world or appreciate that we want to preserve the planet for the future.'

Khamsin grimaced. 'I saw the slag heaps by the mine.'

'You know the companies don't offer easily mined planets as colony worlds. The ores have to be carefully refined and that takes time. Some would rather strip this world of rare metals quickly. Especially blue gold.'

'Blue gold? Is that like gold gold?'

'Rarer.'

An insistent beeping sounded. It seemed to be emanating from Anton's groin. Anton gave her a sheepish grin before unclipping the communicator from his belt.

'Yes, Father?'

'Anton, are you still out in the flyer with the Doctor and his young friend?'

'Yes, I'm still out here with Khamsin but the Doctor decided not to join us.'

'Good, while you're out there, call in on the fishing village. I promised to visit today; they've been agitating about some problem for the last few days.'

'Why aren't you going?'

'It appears that the miners have found some kind of odd, ancient device. We're analysing it at the moment and I can't leave yet. We think it's probably some space debris, but it's best to take precautions. We want everything to be running smoothly when the colony ship docks. Nothing for you to worry about.'

'Fine, I'll go to the fishing village. But I thought they'd established that this had been an uninhabited planet and system before opening it up to us. How come we're finding space debris all of a sudden?'

'I don't know, Anton. Please, just go and see the fishers so I have one less thing to worry about.'

'Yes, sir,' Anton replied. He jabbed at the buttons on the communicator and flourished the device at Khamsin. 'Completely off. Now I won't be sent on any more errands while we're out.'

Khamsin grinned, jumped up and started dragging Anton towards the flyer. 'I don't think the Doctor will miss me if there's alien artefacts to poke about and mysterious women to follow. Come on, I'd like to see your fishing village.'

The lock *snicked*, and the Doctor opened the door and made a sweeping bow. 'And there you are. Locks unlocked, disasters averted, it's all part of a day's work for me.'

The woman stared at him in surprise. 'You're a Time Lord!' She hurriedly hid her hands behind her back. 'Did the High Council send you?'

The Doctor straightened, indignant at the implication. 'Hardly. I'm the Doctor.'

She inclined her head, still keeping her hands behind her back. 'Lady Lecgandreyas.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'That's a mouthful. You might want to consider shortening it.'

'Why?'

The Doctor waved airily. 'Long names have a tendency to be mispronounced. You might find yourself called Leggyreyas or Leeanndreyas, and you wouldn't know to duck.'

Lecgandreyas looked puzzled. 'An aquatic avian? Why?' She shook her head and pulled her locator from behind her back. 'The device is near. We must hurry.' She started walking.

The Doctor looked over at the locator screen. 'A directional locator? We could be wandering the halls all day! That won't even tell us if we're on the right floor.'

Lecgandreyas sniffed. 'I didn't think I'd need a more specialised one. I thought the colonists would bring me to the device when I asked.'

'Well, you thought wrong. So, what is this device?'

'You know of the experiments of Rassilon to develop a time travel power source, before he allied with Omega?'

The Doctor's expression grew thoughtful. 'Yes... Omega was the solar engineer and convinced him that suns would create more power. But before Omega, Rassilon tried exploding planets. Many planets...' He stopped in his tracks. 'You don't mean... Here?!'

Lecgandreyas continued along the corridor. 'One bomb was defective. Instead of exploding the planet, it buried itself deep into the crust. Now the colonists have dug it up.'

The Doctor looked relieved. 'Oh. Well, if it's defective, then...'

She shook her head. 'In the history I studied the blast took out not only the small colony on the planet, but the approaching colony ship as well. And on the colony ship were thousands in frozen sleep.'

The Doctor stared at her. 'In the history... you want to change the past?! Don't you know the consequences of that? I can't help you. You can't change what will happen.'

'Oh, I know the High Council will try to stop me, but..'

The Doctor clutched his hair. 'The High Council? Try the CIA!'

'The what?'

'The Celestial Intervention Agency. I'm surprised someone isn't here already. Don't you understand? Can't. Be. Done. You'll be damaging the Web of Time if you try.'

She stopped and looked back at him. 'But a Gallifreyan device will cause the destruction. It's *our* fault!'

'It's not *my* fault!'

'It will be if you don't help.' She looked at him, then turned away. 'Not that I need your help. ssilon's planetdestroyers had advanced programming, much more so than Omega's crude sunkillers... ey had to be more intelligent in order to choose the best possible sites for detonation. This one ould respond to reason.'

'That's what I thought about the Hand of Omega. I was wrong.'

She turned back, surprised. 'You're afraid of it!' He looked offended, and she repeated. 'You are! u're afraid of it!'

'I am not!' He straightened his jacket. 'Not afraid, that is. I'm just...more aware of the subtleties an you seem to be. Bombs, especially intelligent bombs, need careful handling. They're very... *ensitive*.' He pointed back at her cell. 'You couldn't even convince the guards to let you pass. You'll eed to be even more diplomatic with a planetdestroyer.'

'You've encountered them before?'

'Something of that ilk, yes. Certainly enough to know that it should not be left where just any old olonist can get their hands on it.' The Doctor momentarily allowed himself to recall another time, nother place; he felt a flush of regret at the way he had sidestepped the issue then, persuading Jamie unwittingly clear up the Time Lords' mess for him. Even now, the thought of unearthing another art of Rassilon's legacy left him feeling uneasy.

'Then you'll help me?' she asked. 'You'll help me save these people? They don't need to die. They weren't supposed to. The records I saw said that the High Council tried to retrieve the device, but ach time they were overridden by some agency.'

'The CIA,' the Doctor said grimly. 'Follow me, and do exactly what I do.'

She stopped and stared at him as he moved away from her down the corridor. 'I am *not* going to walk on the tips of my toes. And anyway,' she pointed down a different corridor', the indicator says he device is this way.'

Khamsin surveyed the fishing village as Anton clambered out of the flyer, noting a tall, bearded man already striding towards them with a determined look on his face. The wood dwellings made the village look more homely than the settlement. The cove was also a much lovelier setting, with the deep green sea lapping up the beach and against the sides of the colonists' boats.

She jumped out of the vehicle just as the man reached Anton and started talking.

'Anton, am I glad to see someone from the main settlement. I've been trying to contact your father, or one of the other councillors for the last two days.'

'Father sends his apologies. He's been very busy, with the approach of the colony ship, and then today they've discovered an unknown device, possibly alien, near the mine.' Before the man could answer, Anton gestured Khamsin forward. 'This is a guest to our colony. Khamsin, this is Fisherman Wheatcroft, who heads up our fishing fleet.'

Wheatcroft nodded curtly towards Khamsin. 'Miss.' He turned back to Anton. 'Surely some alien toy can wait, when we may not be able to feed the colonists on their arrival! I've been trying to tell your father, the fish shoals on this part of the coast are being devastated. Hundreds left dead on the shore after the last few high tides.'

'What? But why?'

'We don't know, otherwise don't you think we'd be doing something about it? The fish are a strange colour, definitely not edible. Our nearest guess is some kind of poison.'

'Poison!' Khamsin exclaimed. 'You mean someone's been doing this on purpose?'

Wheatcroft looked at her in surprise. 'No, no, I don't think so. I meant something poisonous to this world, probably something we bought with us. Even with all the testing you can't be sure that the

environment will cope with the influx of humans.'

'Umm, definitely a more serious problem than we'd realised. I think we better collect samples of the dead fish, water and anything that might have affected them. Then I can take them back to the settlement for urgent testing and get a team sent out straight away.'

'Good, let's get started.' Wheatcroft seemed appeased by Anton's reaction to the crisis. 'I'm sure once you get the samples back we might finally get something done around here. One of the lads suggested that it might be a bacterial infection, something the survey team weren't carrying on them. It's been known before.'

'Oh, you mean like emigrants bringing diseases to the Americas, the local population dying from flu and all that?' Khamsin piped up.

Wheatcroft looked slightly confused. 'I don't know about that, Miss, but it certainly happened on Taurus 4. Wiped out the herds of local herbivores they were hoping to farm; left them bankrupt. Anyway, we best get on, then.'

'Yes, of course.' Anton gestured for Wheatcroft to take the lead.

The locator led them to a solid wall. The Doctor sighed, and with a muttered 'Directional locators', backtracked through the hallways, eventually ending up before a door labelled "Science Labs 1-4".

Lecgandreyas tried the handle. 'It's locked,' she said accusingly.

The Doctor patted his pockets, but a sudden call of 'Doctor!' from a nearby doorway made him turn with his hands empty.

'Administrator Ferrin! How good to see you again. I must have gotten lost. I was looking for...'

The tall man gestured them over to the doorway. 'I'm so thankful you didn't go on Anton's tour.'

He glanced inside the room, and they could see a large viewscreen filled with people arguing. 'Doctor, our miners have unearthed a very old and obviously alien object. Our colony ship is afraid that this might mean that this planet had inhabitants that could dispute our claim to colonise. Has your colony encountered any aliens native to these systems? I'm trying to explain to the ship leaders that...'

'Ferrin!' a voice from the viewscreen demanded.

The locked door to the labs suddenly flew open and arguing white-coated scientists came boiling out, several shouting amongst themselves, but most shouting back into the labs. 'You'll regret this, Hasting!'

'Just see how far you get without us!'

'Get out! All of you!'

'How dare he kick us out!'

'Ferrin, I'm filing a grievance. Hasting has no right to disregard our theories.'

The Doctor noticed Lecgandreyas attempting to slip inside, but the press of people exiting left no opportunity to enter before the door slammed shut in her face. 'Definitely needs to work on her timing,' he commented.

'Really, Tomar! Your outlandish idea that those sounds were caused by the device attempting to communicate with us was what drove Hasting over the edge.'

'It only made those sounds in response to our tests!'

'Ferrin, I demand you speak to Hasting!'

'Ferrin!' came the voice from the viewscreen.

'Sounds?' Lecgandreyas struggled through the crowd. 'The device is making sounds?'

'Is that bad?' the Doctor asked.

'Very bad,' Lecgandreyas said worriedly. She turned to try the door handle again.

'Ferrin!' the viewscreen bellowed. The administrator hurried into the room, the crowd of squabbling scientists following in his wake. 'Ferrin! Oh, there you are. So, what is the device?'

'Is it safe to land?' another person on the viewscreen asked.

Ferrin looked around helplessly at the scientists. 'Er...'

'No,' the Doctor said firmly. 'If you can slow your approach, then do so. While we're out here, in there,' he pointed to the labs, 'is a very powerful device capable of destroying this entire planet. And if it does, the ship will be destroyed as well.'

Silence fell as everyone stared at him.

'And you are...?' one scientist prodded.

'I'm the Doctor, and this is...'

'Call me Dreyas.' The Doctor looked surprised, and Lecgandreyas shrugged. 'You're right. The name is too long. But I like Dreyas better.'

Ferrin broke in hurriedly, 'The Doctor is visiting from Chimboma, over in the next system. He's encountered these aliens before.'

'You could say that,' the Doctor agreed. 'But right now the important thing is to get into that lab before your scientist triggers the destruct sequence.'

'Quickly,' Dreyas added. 'We have less time than you realise.'

Ferrin glanced from one to the other, then looked at the surrounding scientists and the viewscreen. He strode to the lab door, the Doctor and Dreyas close behind him, and unlocked it. He led the way quickly to Lab 1, but the Doctor noticed that less than half of the scientists followed.

Inside Lab 1, a large bearded man was hunched over a large egg-shaped object atop the main table. Various scientific instruments were directed at the ovoid, and assistants read off the readings at the man's directions. Both Gallifreyans recognised the ornate seal decorating the upper portion of the device.

'There, you see!' The bearded man rapped the carved casing with a knuckle. 'No dents, no indentations- it resists even the densest chisel. This is not gold, but some metal alloy completely unknown to science. Let's try a bombardment of tribon rays.' A rusty-sounding squeak followed upon his orders.

Tomar turned to Ferrin. 'Hear that? It understands him!'

'No!' Dreyas protested.

The bearded man looked up. 'Ferrin, what are you doing in here with these people? I gave orders that all nonessential personnel leave.' He slammed his hand against the table, close to the ovoid. 'At once.' The ovoid bounced.

'That's impossible,' Tomar said, staring at the device. 'That thing is so heavy it took three miners to carry it in.'

Suddenly the ovoid bounced again, on its own. A series of clicks sounded inside.

'It's awake.' Dreyas gasped.

'It's armed.' the Doctor added.

The device made a sudden, strange clattering noise, and then began a rhythmic tonal beat.

'Gallifreyan machine code,' the Doctor said. 'It's started the countdown.'

Once at the shore, at a part blighted with hundreds of dead fish, Wheatcroft and Anton quickly set to work taking different samples for testing. Feeling slightly useless, Khamsin decided to walk further along the beach.

'I'm going to see how far the shoal stretches.'

Anton looked up and nodded. 'Okay, just don't go too far. We have to get these samples back quickly. I'll give you a shout when I'm ready to leave.'

Carefully skirting round the piles of fish corpses, Khamsin strode off in the opposite direction from the one they'd come. She loved animals and nature but she wasn't too keen on squishy, smelly lumps of dead nature. Plus, she was rather fond of the purple boots she had on. The Doctor had bought them for her on a previous trip, and she'd rather not have them stink of fish.

The Doctor would probably have taken one look at the fish, told them what caused it and how to fix it. Well, after he'd guessed wrong a few times. All she could think to do was try not to get in the way. She slowly realised that instead of the smell thinning as she'd hoped it was getting stronger. There was a large concentration of dead fish around the mouth of a nearby stream. She picked her way over to the stream and peered closely at the water. It appeared to have a odd tinge to it, glistening slightly in the light with the rainbow-like effect of petrol in water, she suddenly thought.

She glanced back to where Anton and Wheatcroft were still busy collecting samples and wondered whether to call their attention to the stream. But she'd look really silly if it was just a natural occurrence on this planet rather than the cause of the deaths as she suspected. She followed the stream back across

the beach, finally coming to a cave mouth from which the stream emerged. She considered the dark entrance and the rather slimy stone floor over which the water trickled. Should she take a quick look inside? On the other hand, slipping in the dark and twisting an ankle wouldn't really be very productive.

Suddenly she heard a faint sound from inside. Echoes, possibly of people talking. The Doctor would definitely investigate mysterious noises. She stepped into the blackness.

Some scientists rushed away from the table, but a few others headed toward the large ovoid, intrigued by the device's sounds.

The Doctor turned to Dreyas. 'You distract Hasting, and I'll put together something to allow us to communicate with the planetdestroyer.'

The machine clatter continued as Dreyas pushed through the crowd. 'Stop that.' she commanded in Gallifreyan. 'Speak so that everyone can understand.'

The machine clatter stopped. 'Accepted.' the device replied.

Ferrin glanced at the Doctor, who shrugged. 'Well, that was easy enough. Now, could you hand me that frequency-band tuner?'

The device continued, 'Please clear the planet. Ten minutes to detonation.'

Anton studied the pile of samples in front of him and decided that there was enough to get his father's attention and give the science team something to go on. He shouted to Wheatcroft, 'Think we've got plenty, I'd better get back so we can start an investigation straight away.'

'Okay, you'd best go and get your lady friend. She went off in that direction.' he replied, pointing up the shore.

Anton stood up and surveyed the beach, looking for Khamsin. 'Can't see her.' he commented just as he caught a glimpse of white and blue disappearing between some rocks in the distance. 'Wait, I think she just went into one of the caves.' He sighed, 'I'll go and fetch her. Could you start loading the samples in the flyer? I won't be long.'

'Right, well don't be. These are more important than pandering to visitors.'

Anton scowled and set off in pursuit of Khamsin.

'Ten minutes?!'

'What sort of prank is this? Tomar, stop this immediately!'

'It's not me!'

'Clear the planet? That's impossible!'

'Illogical!'

Of all the protests, only Dreyas' exclamation brought a swift flicking of lights over the bomb's surface. 'Why?' it asked.

She glanced at the Doctor, who signalled her to go on. He snatched up more instruments to add to what he was constructing as she continued, 'There are far more lifeforms than ships on the surface. It would take more than ten minutes to gather all of them into transports.'

'This is ridiculous!' Hasting shouted, waving a small beamer for emphasis.

'That's exactly what I need.' The Doctor plucked the beamer from his hand. 'Could I use this? Thank you.'

The bearded scientist looked from his empty hand to the Doctor and back at Dreyas. He started toward the Doctor. 'I want all of you out of here immediately. I'm trying to conduct serious research here.'

'You're trying to get us all killed,' the Doctor said acidly as he fitted another piece into his construction, and using the beamer to fuse it into place. 'Just let us handle this. There's a good chap.'

'Ferrin!' Hasting turned on the administrator.

'Besides, you've waited how many hundreds of years.' Dreyas coaxed, 'Surely several more days won't hurt.'

'Hundreds?' the device repeated.

'Thousands,' the Doctor corrected. 'Your maker no longer needs the power that this planet's destruction would generate.'

'No longer needed?'

'No!' The Doctor threw the switch on his construction. There was a sharp crackle and a puff of smoke rose.

'Tsk. Sorry about that.' the bomb commented.

Dreyas glared at the Doctor. 'What was that?' she demanded.

'An interference wave generator,' the planetdestroyer said. 'Ten minutes.'

Dreyas scowled at the Doctor before turning back to the bomb. 'We went over this before. Ten minutes isn't long enough.'

The Doctor ran a hand through his hair as he looked at his broken device.

'Why do you have to destroy this planet, anyway?'

The planetdestroyer clicked. 'It is my purpose.'

'Well, find a new purpose!' The Doctor swung an arm out to the surrounding scientists. 'Work with them to help with the colony.'

'A bomb work with us?' Hasting scoffed.

Dreyas looked over the casing. 'Detach the explosive. It would be child's play to build a unit for just the "mind".' She appealed to the other scientists. 'Remember, it was here when mineral layers formed—and it probably mapped them all.'

'We won't be mining as much once the settlers arrive,' Ferrin said worriedly.

'And this device would still be valuable for the settlement!' the Doctor countered. 'It knows the water tables, natural springs— Just think of what a useful citizen it could be for your colony.'

'I don't have to destroy myself?'

'Not if you don't want to,' Dreyas said.

'It's a machine,' Hasting said. '"Want" shouldn't enter into it.'

The bomb ticked loudly. 'Five minutes.'

Once her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, Khamsin realised that she was in a natural rock passageway. The rocks underfoot were slightly slippery, but she managed to keep her balance with a hand on the nearest wall.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed a faint light around the bend in the passage. She started to think that turning back was a good idea, but then she heard the noises again. This time she could make out some of the words echoing off the walls. She could hear two voices.

'Right... last lot... leave soon...'

'Good... open market... main settlement...'

She was suddenly confronted by a rock face and realised that the light and noise were coming from a large crevice further up the slope.

Well, she thought, she'd come this far, she might as well climb on up and say hi to the folks she could hear. The conversation ceased as she scrambled up the rocks; it sounded as if they were dragging heavy objects around instead. Which would make sense if they were miners, she reasoned.

After a few minutes of exertion and badly scraped hands, she hauled herself through the crevice and stopped to catch her breath. She found herself behind a dirt mound. Water dripped from the cavern roof and oily rivulets ran from the mound down several smaller crevices. She realised why the stream had such a funny colour; it was runoff from this slag heap. She bet the miners didn't realise that they might be the cause of the fish devastation outside. Communication between different parties on this colony did seem to be lacking somewhat. Anton would be happy if this was the cause as it could so easily be removed.

Back on the beach, Anton was arriving at the same conclusions that Khamsin had. He'd followed the oddly coloured stream along its course to the cave entrance where he'd last seen Khamsin. She must

have decided to check where the pollutant was coming from, he mused. A few minutes later, after slipping over twice and whacking his head on a low rock outcrop, he thought Khamsin's impulsiveness less endearing.

Khamsin heard the voices again from further down the now machine-made tunnel and continued towards them. The conversation gradually became clearer.

'That's the last of it loaded, Mikel, and I bet it's gonna set us up for life.'

Khamsin thought that it sounded like a feminine voice, a very rough sounding feminine to be honest but the wrong pitch to be male.

'It better, the trouble it's taken me to get it. Though I think you'll find, my dearest Kala,' another voice sneered, 'that it's gonna set *me* up for life, not us.'

'What d'you mean? We had a deal, 50/50. I got the mining equipment and helped you find the mineral, you got it and me off planet.' The female voice had taken on a more aggressive tone and Khamsin realised this didn't sound like colony business at all.

It was too late to turn back. She could see the owners of the voices slightly further along the tunnel. A small stocky man leaned against a sleek, if somewhat dented land vehicle. His clothes were definitely not colony issue; high-quality green trousers and a three quarter length, padded jacket covered in pockets. He looked in his 40's, his not-unattractive face slightly lined, and his thick brown hair swept backwards. Khamsin didn't recognise him from the main colony. The woman opposite him looked more familiar, but then she was wearing the standard mine issue brown coveralls. Her long, fading blonde hair was scraped back into a ponytail, and her thin, dirt-smudged face looked tired, worn and confused.

'The deal's changed, Kala. I think you'd annoy me too much on a long haul, so you'll be staying here.' The man produced a blaster from one of his jacket pockets.

Kala looked totally shocked and dismayed at the blaster aimed toward her. Her voice trembled. 'Why, Mikel? We've made so many plans; how we'd spend the money, how we'd make a life together. I love you.'

'Ha! Of course you do, because you're a pathetic, desperate little woman who'd think she was in love with anyone offering her a flattering comment. You were so easy to fool, I didn't even have to be that nice to you.'

Khamsin could see that Kala was visibly shrinking at every word, and she felt pity welling up for her. Then her pity turned into fear as she realised that Mikel was about to fire. Khamsin surged forward shouting, 'NO!'

Both glanced round in surprise at the interruption. Mikel recovered first and swung back toward Kala. The blaster flared and Kala fell to the ground, one side of her chest a gaping hole, the flesh charred. Khamsin screamed. Her voice died as the blaster moved to cover her. She threw herself out of the line of fire. Landing painfully, she found herself near Kala's corpse. Her nostrils filled with the scent of burned flesh. She looked up to find Mikel studying her with contempt, his weapon drilling a spot between her eyes.

Anton hauled himself over the rock outcropping and stared at the slag heap. Someone was processing blue gold!

He heard Khamsin shout, then scream. He sprang to his feet and was running before the echo had died.

'Khamsin! Khamsin, where are you? Are you all right?'

He got no reply as he rounded the bend in the corridor, apart from the blaster shot that burned the floor before him. He halted and stared, shocked, at a short man holding Khamsin roughly in front of him as a shield, an arm tight around her throat; the other pointing the recently fired weapon in Anton's direction.

'You just stay where you are.'

The thought that he had no intention of going anywhere right at that moment flitted across Anton's brain, but was blotted out by the sight of the corpse on the floor. He recognised the woman as one of the miners. The man's face looked familiar too; one of the traders maybe.

'I recognise you. Your Father's on the council, isn't he? High-up friends you have, Missy. Well, never mind. You'll die just as easily as Kala there.' The man gestured with his gun at the dead woman. 'Can't have you running back to Daddy, now can we?'

Anton felt fear tickling the base of his spine at those words but before it could paralyse him completely he saw Khamsin thrust back her left elbow and foot.

'RUN!' she screamed at him as her captor reeled backwards, the blaster now waving towards the ceiling.

The man still had a grip on Khamsin. Anton moved towards them, desperately trying to think what to do next. He was sure he wasn't strong enough to fight a spacer, especially one with a gun. But he couldn't just leave her, could he?

Struggling to keep Mikel off-balance, in order for Anton to get away, Khamsin rolled her eyes as Anton ran towards her. Thinking heroic thoughts, no doubt.

'Run the other way, you idiot! Get help! Get the Doctor!'

Khamsin was getting tired straining against Mikel's arm and his grip tightened again, choking off any further attempts to speak. She noticed Anton hesitate at her second shout and she weakly flapped one hand in his direction, hoping he would realise it was another indication that he should get the hell out of there. She was relieved to see him spin on his heel and head in the direction of the beach.

She took as a deep a breath as she could manage under the circumstances and launched herself backwards. The back of her head slammed painfully into Mikel's face. They both fell to the ground, and Khamsin landed heavily on top of Mikel. Her amusement at his grunt was quickly choked when his arm crashed down into her windpipe.

Khamsin gasped for breath; the back of her head pounding. She could see Anton still running, almost rounding the bend in the passage. The blaster whined behind her. A chunk of rock near Anton exploded, and dust flooded the tunnel.

'Will you be quiet!' Dreyas ordered Hasting. She turned back to the planetdestroyer. 'Your destruction is no longer necessary. Rassilon wouldn't want you to kill innocent beings!'

'Wouldn't want. Want. I don't... want to destroy.'

'Then don't!' the Doctor ordered.

'The maker...' The device ticked loudly. 'Programming... Find suitable planet within parameters...'

'Scan the planet again,' Dreyas wheedled. 'You've been buried for thousands of years. Does this planet still fit the parameters?'

The frantic ticking stopped. The ovoid lifted off the table and hovered. 'Scanning.'

Wheatcroft loaded the last of the samples into the flyer and saw Anton finally approaching from the beach. He started to ask why he'd taken so long and where the girl had got to, when he noticed the boy was coated in rock dust. Under that, he looked pale, exhausted even. His right leg was dragging slightly, and there was a trickle of blood on his calf mingling with odd oily smears.

Wheatcroft rushed over to support him. 'What happened??'

Anton slumped into his arms and looked up wearily, his face creased with pain. 'Black marketeer, mining blue gold. He's taken Khamsin hostage. We need to get help.'

'Have you called the settlement?'

'Communicator broke. Fell on it when he shot at me.'

'Shot at you? Is that why you're bleeding?'

'He had a blaster. He missed me but blew up some rocks. I got caught by a flying shard.' Anton started struggling toward his flyer as he spoke, his breathing punctuated with pain. '...need to stop him leaving.'

Wheatcroft could see the boy was in no fit state to fly and decided to take charge. He took most of Anton's weight off his injured leg as they headed towards the flyer.

'Right, you get on the horn to the main settlement. I'll fly us back and round up some of my lads to stop the bastard blasting off.'

The light display about the bomb faded. 'Completed. You are correct. Composition of deposits necessary for parameters has changed. This planet is no longer suitable for the maker's needs.'

The scientists sighed with relief.

Hasting started toward the table. 'Right. Now that that's decided, I have some major tests to run.'

The device swung away from the table. 'I must find another planet for my maker.'

Hasting stared. 'Get back here!'

Dreyas blocked the bomb's path toward the door. 'We told you the truth. Your maker no longer needs you to destroy yourself.'

Lights flickered. 'But that is my purpose.'

'Then you must find another purpose. Doctor?' she appealed.

Tomar glanced at Ferrin for support. 'You could stay. Your knowledge would be very helpful for us.'

'Stay?'

The journey to the smuggler's hidden spacecraft had been uncomfortable and scary for Khamsin. She'd been crammed into the back of Mikel's vehicle among boxes of blue gold, and every bump they went over had left a bruise on her body somewhere from crates smashing into her from all sides.

Mikel talked incessantly, gloating about her bringing a high price on the slave market, even if he damaged her a bit first. Apparently her colouring- pale skin, red hair- was unusual in this part of space. Not for the first time in her life, Khamsin cursed her hair.

The cargo hold door slowly lifted upwards, and Mikel steered the vehicle inside, manoeuvring to park snugly against a row of crates. He seized her bound wrists and dragged her out of the vehicle. He pulled her through a doorway and sealed the opening, while Khamsin looked around at yet another collection of mineral crates.

Ignoring her complaints, he pushed her to the floor and tied her ankles together, then checked her wrists before leaving the hold. She pushed herself to a sitting position, indignant at being treated as if she were just another commodity.

She was aching terribly from her recent journey. Far worse was that she couldn't seem to get rid of the smell of burnt flesh. The memory of Kala's death kept flashing across her mind. The body falling to the ground, the gaping hole in her chest and the smell...that awful smell.

Khamsin realised that she needed to do something, anything to get her brain functioning again. She slowly started to work on the straps binding her wrists, all the time chanting song lyrics quietly to herself, as if the mantra would keep everything else at bay.

'I am the eggman?'

Wheatcroft's men had finally located the hiding place of the smuggler's spacecraft on the Tungasy plains by the time Anton managed to get through to his father on the communicator. He kept hearing something about there having been a colony-wide crisis, but he was far more concerned about Khamsin. Damn it! She'd been his responsibility, and look what had happened.

He turned his attention back to the communicator as the Doctor's voice blared out.

'Where is she, Anton?'

'Inside the ship, I guess. Wheatcroft's men have made sure it can't launch.'

'No one's stealing our blue gold,' a nearby fisher growled.

'Hang on, Anton,' his father said. 'Someone's on another channel.'

Mikel stared at the viewscreen in disbelief. 'Could you call back later?'

Adminstrator Ferrin repeated. 'We have a bit of a crisis here.'

'You'll have a bigger crisis,' he responded, 'starting with a dead girl, if you don't do what I say.'

That caught their attention. A formally dressed man with wild hair straightened, seemingly staring directly into Mikel's eyes. 'So it's you, is it?' His voice turned very cold as he continued, 'I don't take kindly to losing companions. What are your terms?'

Mikel addressed Ferrin. 'Call off the fishers. I'll release the girl before I take off.'

'You're not taking our blue gold,' a scientist sputtered.

Mikel suddenly noticed a large egg hovering next to a fancy-dressed woman. He stared at it, calculations going rapidly through his mind. 'Oh, so that's the artefact Kala mentioned. I'll take that, too.' He was half-tempted to demand the woman bring it, but she looked like trouble. He turned to the skinny man beside her, deciding that he looked less of a threat. 'And you're going to bring it to my ship. One half cycle. That should give you enough time to get here. And no funny business or I'll kill the girl.'

He snapped off the screen and smiled in satisfaction. He'd have a valuable space artefact and two slaves for the market as well as a hold full of blue gold. This planet was even more profitable than he had anticipated.

The Doctor turned away from the blank screen and found Dreyas waiting. 'Out of the question,' she said. 'The device is too powerful to be turned over to that sort of individual.'

'He has my friend. You had better factor that into the question.'

Dreyas frowned at him.

Ferrin opened the wall map, and the Doctor gestured toward it. 'Now, Anton, where exactly is that ship?'

Khamsin found that rhythmic movement of her bonds against the crate corner was actually quite soothing. Soon the first strands started to break. She vigorously increased her efforts, and the rest of the rope quickly frayed. She pulled the remnants from around her wrists and looked at the raw marks in dismay. The scrapes on her hands burned, her head still hurt. She checked her head, and added a missing hat to her list of complaints. She ached all over. The first thing she would do if she made it back to the TARDIS would be to have a long, hot soak. Or a joint. Or possibly both at once.

Releasing her ankles, she started looking for something useful.

'Sleeping gas?' one scientist suggested.

'He's got a ship with its own air supply,' Hasting scowled.

'Do you have time travel ability?' Dreyas asked the device.

'Time travel?' the Doctor asked.

'If we give the device to him, it doesn't have to stay once he releases your friend. It could shift in time to when the ship isn't there and then return here.'

Hasting laughed. 'Why not simply have it smash its way out?'

'It's a bomb. Do you want to risk a 'boom' with the smashing?' Tomar retorted.

The ovoid's hover dipped. 'My purpose is to create an energy source for time travel.'

'There's already an energy source.' Dreyas held out her wrist. 'Even this time ring taps into it for time travel.'

The ovoid circled about her. 'Simple device. So easy to duplicate.' It hummed and moved closer to her wrist. 'Very easy.'

The time ring emitted a faint buzz. Dreyas looked down, startled. 'What? Someone has activated…' She suddenly vanished. The bomb bobbed slightly in its hover, and a faint whine started.

The Doctor shook his head. 'That's the trouble with time rings. Someone else always can override by remote control.' He turned to the planetdestroyer. 'Now don't worry. I'm sure she'll be all right.'

The faint whine grew stronger, and the ovoid's outline shimmered and was gone.

'Oh.' The Doctor turned to the scientists. 'So much for Plan A. Here's Plan C.'

'What happened to Plan B?'

'It went home to Gallifrey.'

The crates she could open were mainly filled with minerals, but none of the pieces was big enough to be used as an effective weapon. Khamsin slumped dejectedly on top of a crate. If her father, the big bad General, could see her now, marooned in enemy territory, he'd call her pathetic. He had been disgusted when she had joined the travelling commune. Hippies were lazy, good-for-nothings. It would be his soldiers that would die to protect their ideals of no violence, wouldn't it?

Although she preferred to avoid violence, Khamsin had quickly learned that travelling with the Doctor often involved violence, usually done to them. A non-violent stance with Mikel wouldn't do her much good. She tried to think back to one of her Dad's lectures on self-defence. Something about anything being a weapon if you're inventive enough?

Perhaps if she used a plank from one of the crates to hit Mikel in the face when he next came back? No, they were fairly thin, and would probably break on contact and make him really mad. A bag of the blue gold over the head would do more damage. That was it; she could fill her bag with the mineral.

Five minutes later, she was standing by the cargo bay door with a bulging and very heavy bag. She hoped that Mikel would appear again before they left the planet, and that it would be soon as her arms were starting to ache.

The whirling journey finally ended, and Dreyas opened her eyes to find herself standing within a circle of bright light. As her eyes adjusted to the glare, she recognised the familiar bland scent of 'freshners, and she raised her head to confront those in the rows of raised seating before her. She frowned, recognising some of the faces. 'You're not the High Council. Why have you brought me here? Where is this?' She bounced slightly, testing the gravity. 'A space station?'

'You have a great deal of questions, Lady Lecgandreyas. But perhaps you can answer some of ours first.'

Another robed Time Lord leaned forward. 'Was it your decision to interfere with the Web of Time? Or were you influenced by someone else? Such as...the Doctor?'

'The Doctor?!' She straightened indignantly. 'I never even met him before! I wanted to save lives, lives that the High Council tried to save as well!' How dare they! This could only be the mysterious CIA that the Doctor had mentioned.

Another unfamiliar figure leaned forward. 'He's already implicated. Your evasiveness will only...' He stopped, his eyes widening. Others began to point at her.

Dreyas was suddenly aware of a slight weight bobbing against her arm. She looked down and saw flickering lights in a familiar rounded shape.

'Found you,' the planetdestroyer said smugly.

Dreyas looked up at the Time Lords shrinking back in their seats. 'You were saying, gentlemen?'

The Doctor knocked politely on the ship hatch. 'Hello? Delivery service!' He adjusted the hover on the small ovoid container beside him and hoped again that the kidnapper hadn't paid much attention to the carvings on the original ovoid.

The hatch slid open to reveal a blaster pointed in his direction. The Doctor sighed and raised his hands. The stocky man behind the blaster looked suspiciously around the sides of the hatchway, then gestured the Doctor inside.

The Doctor barely had a chance to pull the container inside before the hatch clanged shut. He turned to find the blaster pointed at his chest. 'I demand to see Khamsin.'

The smuggler sneered and gestured at the ship's sensors. 'Those fishers still have my ship targeted.'

'And they'll continue to do so until I see Khamsin and we're both released. Now take me to her.' The man hesitated, and the Doctor added, 'If I don't talk to them in a few minutes, they'll put a hole in your engines. And I won't talk to them until I see Khamsin.'

Khamsin was straining under the weight of her improvised weapon when she heard footsteps echoing down the corridor outside. She braced herself. The doors swished open and Mikel strode through.

oblivious to Khamsin standing to the side. She heaved with all her might and the bag swung through the air. The weight of the blue gold caused the main compartment of the bag to split, depositing a spray of nuggets atop Mikel's head. He collapsed.

Khamsin didn't wait. She fled out the door and ploughed into the Doctor. He steadied her with a half disgruntled and half delighted expression. 'And I'm pleased to see you, too, Khamsin!'

Mikel groaned from inside the hold and Khamsin and the Doctor exchanged glances. 'This way,' the Doctor indicated. Khamsin wasted no time in following.

The Doctor braked to a halt outside what seemed to be the engine room.

'I'll just be a minute.' The Doctor darted inside. There was a crashing noise, and the Doctor reappeared in the doorway. 'He won't be leaving in a hurry. Not without this.' He held up a small component, then slipped it into his pocket. 'Now let's get out of here.'

Mikel climbed unsteadily to his feet. The colonists had tricked him! He spotted a hovering ovoid nearby and was surprised at his luck. They had left the artefact behind! He patted the shiny surface possessively, admiring his prize. He was so busy calculating the possible profit that he only slowly became aware of an odd ticking sound.

He looked about the hold. The ticking seemed to be coming from the ovoid. A bomb!

Frantically he dragged the ovoid across the hold to the outside cargo lock. The ticking grew louder. He unsealed the door and pushed the ovoid outside.

Hands seized his wrists and he struggled against the fishers. 'Let me go! That thing is going to go off!'

The ovoid hovered nearby. The ticks suddenly stopped. A loud alarm bell began to peal from inside the egg.

Wheatcroft checked his wrist chronometer. 'Right on time, I'd say. Eh, boys?'

Khamsin and the Doctor appeared around the bulk of the ship, and Khamsin's eyes widened at the sight of the ringing egg. 'An alarm clock? You came to rescue me with an alarm clock? Groovy!'

'Groovy indeed.' The Doctor gazed skyward, seeing instead another planet, under a different sun. 'I think some other people are getting their wake-up call about now as well.' He grinned at her suddenly and rubbed his hands together. 'So, shall we be off?'

'What, and miss the colony ship's arrival? Can't we stay for that? *Pleeease?*

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The Feast of St. Crispin Crispianus

by Louise Sellers

It was a winter night when they fell to Earth. The enforcer was hot on the heels of the fugitive. He was driven by a determination to catch his quarry that had led him out on a limb far beyond the reaches of any backup he might once have been able to call upon. The chase had taken him years, sifting through a hundred strange cultures to find his prey and now, finally, the villain was in his sights. His mind was filled with his obsession; the violent one would not escape him. The two of them raced through the galaxies far beyond the centres of civilisation out into a spiral arm and there the quarry, the last of the fuel enabling his flight burned out, turned at bay on the one planet with life.

The fugitive fell to Earth in London near the developing Palace of Whitehall and headed within with justice on his heels. In a narrow and deserted corridor he finally turned. His journey through the civilisations and cultures of the spiral arm had not been without benefits. He had amassed knowledge and skills undreamed of by his compatriots. It had not all been planned with intricate precision but nevertheless it had been planned. The fugitive had foreseen the possibility of this circumstance and he had planned for it. As the enforcer rounded the corner at the top of the staircase the fugitive unleashed a burst of energy, a massive spike of electricity. His pursuer screamed in the energy burst as it overloaded his internal matrix. His problem was solved. The fugitive halted. He heard voices coming up the passage. The stolen details of this world he had purchased far away allowed him to translate:

"This English King, will he come to France?"

"I would imagine that is certain now."

As the two men rounded the far corner the fugitive surged forward towards the first of them.

"Ah!"

"What is it, Mountjoy? Are you hurt?"

"No. No, I'm fine. I felt a tingling sensation, like you sometimes get when you pick up weapon or armour. Only stronger."

"I know the feeling, but there is no metal here. These English are not practicing some witchcraft are they? I hear the King is well learned."

"I doubt it. This King is a devout Christian. Well, whatever sorcery it was, it has passed now."

The men moved on.

Sometime later the King and his entourage followed down the same dimly lit corridor. Their footsteps echoed round the walls of the castle and down the corridors. The sound announced that the King had left the deliberations of the council chamber. Everyone in the palace knew they had been debating whether to go to war with France. The decision had presumably been taken.

"We sail for France in the spring," said the King as he walked over the point where the enforcer had last stood. "'S'blood!" he exclaimed.

"What is it sire?" his brother Bedford was at his side in seconds.

"I don't know, I felt as if... I don't know. We are King. It was nothing." He straightened his shoulders and they continued on.

Autumn was coming on apace. The men who crouched round the campfires near the walls of the besieged town knew this. There was a chill in the air. The siege could not continue for much longer, not if the army was to be in safe territory behind secure supply lines when winter set in. It was going badly. The siege had taken too long and the soldiers hoped that the King would not continue it into a wet autumn or even try to push further into unwelcoming France before the cold set in.

A small and select gathering had collected around one fire. The men hunched uneasily and presented a cold, unwelcoming face to any strangers who approached them. They were all foot soldiers or archers. Their clothing and armour was unadorned and minimal compared to that of the nobility. They spoke little except to grumble about the lateness of the year and the length of the siege.

"It's that Sir Lawrence," said one man, spitting after the name. "My Lord Gloucester tells me that the King prefers his council to all the grey beards of England and that Sir Lawrence is for continuing the siege."

There was a murmur of assent round the fire. They were Gloucester's men at heart and while they might privately doubt the veracity of his words it was clear that Gloucester was for turning back and that he wanted Lawrence out of the way. They cared nothing for the fortunes of Sir Lawrence but looked forward to Calais and the possibility of a return to England.

"I'm looking for Jack Miller," said a voice. It was softly spoken but an edge of steel lurked beneath the tone.

"Who's asking?"

A tall man stepped into the firelight. He had striking features that could have been crudely carved from rock. In the firelight his hair looked a washed out, light grey. It was probably brown in colour and was cut short, though longer than was the fashion. He had an air of calm. "My name is Lytton," he said.

The men looked to their spokesman, "Aye, my lord Gloucester has mentioned you," he said. "He told me you have no love of Sir Lawrence."

Somewhere in the floors deep below him he heard the sound of an explosion. He looked up feeling servos cranking in his neck, straightening his artificial and apparently undamaged spine. The TARDIS had gone. In minutes the fires from the explosion would reach the control room.

"I have an old score to settle," said Lytton. "He once left me to die."

"I'm Jack Miller," said the man, "and you're welcome here."

Lytton stepped into the ring, men making way for him. He sat down with his back against a log and sank into a the relaxed pose of an old soldier who knows this is as comfortable as he's going to get for a while.

Jack Miller looked round the ring of faces, "I think we're all here and there's no one here who shouldn't be. Let's be straight about this. We're here because of Sir Lawrence. We're here because a jumped up squire of no family has got above himself and got so far into the King's affections that he can set the course of the war and that war is going ill for us."

"Not to mention the 30 marks you promised us to help get rid of him," said a wiry man with a scar above his eye who was seated across from Jack.

Several of the men laughed. "You'll get paid well enough, Nym," said Jack. "I just wanted it clear what this is about."

"I don't know Jack," said an older man in his forties. "I've served Gloucester many years and my father before me but murder is a grave matter. It won't go well with God, I'm thinking."

"Don't you worry about God," said Jack. "They all say the King loves Sir Lawrence like a brother. Some say more than a brother. Weigh the treatment of Sir Lawrence and of Gloucester. Those closest to the King say Sir Lawrence has led him from God's law. You take a good look, next time you chance to see the two of them about the camp, and you tell me whether you think Sir Lawrence looks at the King right or not."

"But Jack you're not saying that the King is a sodomite, are you?" asked a large blonde man.

"I'm not saying anything against the King, but if you look at that Sir Lawrence with his smooth skin and his talk of gentleness and mercy. Take a good look at him and then come and tell me he's not a danger to the King's soul that God would thank us to remove."

"Gloucester says this? That it's God's will?" asked the older man, pushing for confirmation.

"Aye, he says so. You can ask him yourself if you like."

"No Jack. You and Gloucester have always been straight with me and mine. If it's his orders that Sir Lawrence be killed and it's his opinion that he poses a threat to the King's soul then I'm satisfied that God will judge me by my obedience and Gloucester by the truth of his saying."

"Good man, John. What say you Lytton? You've been quiet through all this."

"I've not much to say. I do this for my own reasons. I care not for the money and I'm not worried

about my soul. I only care that this thing is done and done well."

"Then we are agreed. Sir Lawrence has gone on an errand to Rouen and is expected back some time tomorrow. Apparently he refused all companions and is travelling alone. Like as not he's spying for the French. We all know their court is holed up in Rouen. If he doesn't make it back then all our problems are solved. We will wait for him on the road."

Thery was one of the foremost alchemists of France. Which is not to say that he was any closer to turning lead into gold than the rest of his trade, but he had skills in the working of metal and the use of chemicals possessed by few others. His reputation for occult knowledge had earned him respect and fame so he was not altogether surprised to have a visit from an English nobleman.

Thery kept his shop in what later centuries would call a picturesque state. He kept the shutters closed letting in as little light as possible and instead wasted wood and candle on lighting the interior. He kept a small forge in one corner with a selection of strange implements scattered around it. He had crammed his shelves with clay pots and curios, desiccated and stuffed creatures, cured pieces of body and trinkets from far lands.

The nobleman was little more than a boy. He had a slight, delicate frame and fine features. Black hair, close-cropped to the length of a monk's tonsure as was the fashion, revealed an elfin face but he moved and spoke with the confidence of someone accustomed to being treated as an equal and to having his orders obeyed.

"A glass jar, silvered within and without?" queried Thery, checking he had got the details correct.

"That's right. With an iron bar extending from the inside above the rim and a top that can close off the lot." This Sir Lawrence leaned on one hand on the counter, his fingers tapping the diagram he had placed on the wooden surface. "I hear you're skilled at such things so I came here rather than attempting it myself over a forge."

"Of course, Sir! May I ask what it's for?"

"I need a Leyden jar to contain an electric field. If you must know."

"Really sir? I.. err.. " The young man frowned impatiently at him and Thery decided not to push the point any further and risk losing the business. The man was right; anyone could probably do the same with a blacksmith's forge though it was an unusual skill for a nobleman to practice. "It'll take a few hours," said Thery.

"I'll wait," said Sir Lawrence.

There were five of them in all when they reached the place picked for the ambush. It was well chosen. The road took a sudden dip into a shallow valley and for five hundred yards or so it was completely concealed from anyone who might be ahead or behind the traveller. Lytton was there alongside Jack Miller, John, Nym and the blonde man who was called Matthew.

Lytton had waited this long before acting for precisely the same reasons the men had chosen the spot. He took out Jack Miller first. That was easy; a simple chop was enough to break his neck. The others were still too shocked to move when he grabbed the Matthew and snapped his neck as well. But they didn't pause beyond that. Nym attacked him with the blunt slab of metal that served him as a sword. Lytton twisted as he came in so the point hit one of the heavily armoured sections. He then grabbed the blade in his hands and snapped it, feeling the servos grind in his arm. Nym's mouth dropped open. Lytton rammed the broken point of the sword through into his brain.

John had done nothing. He was holding his sword, but staring at Lytton dumbfounded.

"Why are you protecting Sir Lawrence?" he asked finally as Lytton held his head ready to snap the spine.

Lytton's memories were hazy from the time after the TARDIS left. He remembered the sound of its return, staggering towards its solidifying form and tumbling in before the final explosions tore apart the base. He remembered someone gasping and hands dragging him into the interior, the sensations that come from heavy doses of pain-killers and then the final struggle into consciousness. There was a brisk form examining the monitors by his bed.

"Who are you?" he asked, staring at the strange sight of tail coat and skin-tight leggings in knee length boots.

"I'm the Doctor. I've regenerated a couple of times since you last met me."
"But..."
"Just don't say it! OK!"
"Because I owe her a favour."

Lytton was waiting in the road when the Doctor came past.

"Lytton! What on Earth are you doing here?"

The day was drawing into dusk and it cast long shadows across the way. It made her indistinct as she approached. In silhouette as she came over the ridge she was much like any other knight. Lytton could only be sure it was her as she approached, though the slightness of her body made in suspect her identity. She'd made a convincing squire but a less convincing knight. She'd cropped her normal pageboy cut even shorter and her movements, unsurprisingly, had the brisk ease and certainty of someone who'd never been constrained by skirts or trains. But her features were pretty and her skin smooth so that try as she might she couldn't manage to appear more than an adolescent.

"Gloucester is moving against you."

"Well it's to be expected. The man cares more for glory than the lives of his men. He gets in the way."

"You are getting too close to the King," said Lytton. His face was carefully expressionless.

"I'm over 900 years old, Lytton. If you think I'm going to do something stupid you can think again."

"Nevertheless..."

"Nevertheless nothing. I have to be close to the King. You know that as well as I do," she frowned. "You didn't come out here just to berate me about the King though. What's going on?"

"Gloucester has been plotting in your absence. There may be trouble once you reach camp."

"Really?" she said suspiciously. "You've not been trying to `protect' me again, have you?"

"You take risks too easily."

"And you take lives too easily," she snapped. "When I said no more deaths I meant it."

"You should trust me, you know."

"And you should trust me." Without another word she spurred her horse and galloped towards the camp.

Lytton was left to bury the dead. He did not much care whether she had approved of his actions. He had always regarded the Doctor as an improviser. A man, and now woman, who succeeded more by luck than judgement. He had studied the Doctor when he first took employment with the Daleks in the sure knowledge that their paths would cross. He had never predicted the manner in which their meeting would end but though he owed the Doctor his life he had no intention of falling in with the Doctor's slap-dash methods.

The army marched north to Calais through the driving autumn rains. It was a grim autumn. Already the cold was sharp in the air between the storms. The paths we knee deep in mud. Wet and cold combined to ensure that, once wet, cloth never dried. The soldiers shivered and cursed, caught the ague and died.

The King rode in the column with the Doctor beside him while Gloucester lurked sulkily in their wake. He was aware of the condition of his army, as was she. As, they both knew, were the French. In the King's mind it was a matter of reaching Calais in time or else finding the right patch of ground on which to meet the French.

"Will Exeter hold the bridge?" asked the King.

"You shouldn't ask me things like that, you know."

"Men may die, Doctor."

"Men are going to die whatever," said the Doctor grimly.

A faint crackle of electricity flickered around the King, interpretable only by the Doctor.

"Yes, Holmes, you will have your chance against the French," she said wearily.

"I wish he wouldn't do that," complained the King. "I look forward to being rid of my unwanted companion."

"You're lucky he hasn't sought to control you," said the Doctor. "He's more than capable of it by now. He'll be strong enough to jump bodies before long."

"While it pleases me to know that my war is for the benefit of the world and not just my rightful

claims. I still find this presence within me irksome."

The Doctor made no comment just stared ahead into the rain. It dripped down into her eyes so she had to blink to clear them. The King observed her minutely. He knew by now that what she did not say was often more important than what she did.

"You know Doctor, I have discussed literature and theology and finance with you for hours. But whenever I bring up the war or the planned crusade you fall silent. I take it you do not approve. This is a just war. You know that."

"No war is just. Least of all one for territorial and dynastic ambition," said the Doctor bitterly. "If I had my way I would not be a part of this, but I can not leave a Morasian loose upon your world and so perforce I must be involved in this grubby little war of yours."

"Have a care, Doctor," growled the King dangerously. "Regaining my French inheritance is my foremost project."

"I know," said the Doctor softly.

The King watched her through the rain, her hair plastered flat and her face set in an expression that was old for her years. He reached out and took her hand bringing it to his lips.

"Well, for all your disapproval, I have been glad of your companionship these past months."

"I do confess my fault, and do submit me to your Highness' mercy."

And in the sudden violence that had followed he had seen the kick from Scroop that should have felled the squire, Lawrence Skrimshaw, but didn't. As the squire punched the man away, the King's eyes had met hers. His face must have betrayed his astonishment and sudden realisation for she smiled cheekily and winked.

Afterwards he summoned her to his presence in the throne room. He had contrived to be alone in the echoing chamber. It had daunted ambassadors and courtiers but Lawrence Skrimshaw could have been standing in a crowded tavern for all the effect it had on her. She'd stood formally with the appropriate respect but she'd had an easy smile on her face.

"You did good service today, whoever you may be. But I am not taking a lady to France."

"What makes you think I'm a lady?" She was still smiling though he had thought there was a flicker behind her eyes, which suggested she was thinking fast.

"You are no common whore and that is enough for me. You remain behind. Who are your family?"

She paused, "You're a Morasian aren't you? An energy creature, which normally lives in symbiosis with the Darons."

He was startled by her strange words but before he could respond the blue fire, which he had half seen a hundred times that Spring, suddenly crackled around him. She looked him in the eye.

"That is why I must come to France with you. That thing should not be here and it should be watched."

He did not for a moment doubt the truth of her words. In a minute she had transformed from a cheeky squire to a commander of men. "This is magic," he said as the blue fire crackled again.

"Don't be silly," she said and the squire was back.

He looked down at the hand he was still holding and then up to her. She reacted as she always did to familiarities, which was to say not at all. He could never make up his mind whether she was simply unaware of his attentions or studiously ignoring them. When he touched her, took her hand or touched her face there was no yielding as with most women nor any sign of drawing back as there was with a few. Once or twice she had caught his eye and smiled but she had always then dropped the hand or removed the touch. He believed in her companionship but her reactions at a deeper level than that both mystified and fascinated him. Once more the air around him sparked in the rain.

"What's he saying now?" asked the King irritably.

"He says he can manage the apprehension of his Moriarty just fine without my help," the Doctor smiled slightly.

"Is he right?"

The Doctor squeezed his hand, "Maybe, but I'm not prepared to take the chance."

Behind them Gloucester coughed. The King dropped her hand with a smile. Gloucester's jealousy and his dread suspicion amused him. One day he would tell Gloucester the secret but for now he preferred to have him in the dark.

Mountjoy the herald came to the King just before the bridge and stood beneath the hanged man. The herald was older than the King. He looked like he had an expressive face though he kept it well under control as he delivered his message. It was difficult to read his expressionless features, but Lytton suspected that he respected the King and sympathised with the plight of his soldiers. Lytton worked his way through the press until he stood just behind the Doctor. Mountjoy delivered his ransom demand and Lytton observed the faint crackle of electricity around him and the answering spark from the King.

"My ransom is this frail and worthless trunk," the King was saying. He ignored the faint fizzle in the damp air. Lytton marvelled anew at his youth. The man was not yet 30 and yet he led his army with extreme confidence. He had classically handsome features; his hair brown and cut in the seemingly ubiquitous monk-like style. He was softly spoken but he had an unmistakable strength and regality in both tone and bearing. In a crowd the eye would be drawn to him.

The King and Mountjoy were a score of yards from each other. Either could cross the distance in moments. Lytton reached for the sword at his belt but he felt the Doctor's restraining hand on his arm.

"He will make no move in this company. There are too many of us."

"Don't count on it," murmured Lytton.

The Doctor's grip on his arm tightened, "Killing the host serves no purpose and you can not damage the creature with a sword."

Lytton carefully relaxed and felt the Doctor's grip relax at the same time but she didn't let go.

"Violence will solve nothing in this situation," she said in a low voice.

"Massive and sudden trauma to the body will dissipate it'. You said so yourself," he said.

"The rules of war forbid you from attacking a Herald. You'd be dead before you could administer your massive and sudden trauma. Only if the Herald attacks first could you hope to succeed. Besides I want to apprehend this criminal of Holmes' without the killing of any hosts."

"Very well," he said. She knew more of the period than did he. He and took his hand off the pommel of his sword. Only then did the light touch lift from his arm.

"They outnumber us five to one you know," the King watched the Doctor carefully in the firelight. She was gazing into the flames which sent an orange glow across her face. In the half light he couldn't see her eyes properly which gave her a strange distant look, even more so than usual. In his fancies he half thought she was one of the fey for she was in so many ways so very strange. He was feeling his way through this conversation for he did not wish to arouse her ire.

"I know," she said.

He took a deep breath and then risked his wish, "Doctor, I would that you were not on the battlefield tomorrow." She looked up then but said nothing. He pushed on, "I will be the happier for knowing you are safe and you have a revulsion for fighting. Don't deny it Doctor. I have seen you use both sword and shield as competently as any Knight in the training yard but I have never seen you use them in anger. You even managed to `forget' them when you entered the breach at Harfleur."

"I find I survive better without weaponry."

"What you did at Harfleur was remarkable but the fact remains; the battlefield is not your place."

She sighed in the darkness, "You are right. I do not belong there not even remotely. I can spend my time more usefully hunting Moriarty. I suspect it will try something during the battle."

"There is no shame, Doctor, in sitting out the fight. You are a woman. No man will think the worse of you if you are not there."

"Do not worry about my pride, my liege. I do what must be done not what makes me look good."

"Hunting for Moriarty will bring you dangerously close to the field I should think and you will forget your sword again I warrant."

She smiled ruefully at him across the firelight.

"I begin to think you know me too well."

"Stay among the baggage train with the boys, Doctor. You will be safe there."

To his surprise she laughed at that. A hard and bitter laugh it was. Then she sighed again. "No sire. I think I will hunt Moriarty but I will promise you that I will do nothing of exceptional danger."

The careful way she had chosen the words told him that her idea of exceptional danger did not match with his.

"I forbid you to make this attempt, Doctor. No," he said as she opened her mouth, "do not argue

with me. You want to negotiate with the creature."

"I will make it an offer, yes," she interrupted, "but I'm not relying on it accepting."

"E'en so. You are going to take a risk. It would be simpler to kill the thing than to set elaborate traps."

She looked angrier than he'd ever seen her then, "Oh!" she said, "and this battle you will fight tomorrow is not an elaborate trap."

"I would not fight this battle tomorrow had I a choice."

"I believe you, but you would not give up France to obtain a peace. Your choices are limited by your ambition."

"Right now I would be pleased to reach Calais unmolested, Doctor. It is not easily I risk the lives of these men."

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. "Let's not argue. Do not prevent my quest tomorrow lord. I will not stop you fighting your battle, do not you stop me seeking this creature."

The King watching her suddenly had no doubt that, should she choose, there would be no battle tomorrow and he feared that would be the worse for the English. He did not know how but there was a hidden force behind the Doctor's actions as if the human form concealed something far more powerful. He suddenly found he was afraid to oppose that force in its full fury.

"Come!" he stood up and offered her his hand. "We should hear mass and last rites. There will be no time tomorrow."

She took it and hauled herself upright. Her head reached no higher than his shoulder. She glanced across at the French camp with a strange look on her face almost as though she could not decide upon something.

"Few of them are hearing the mass," she said at last and then, faintly, under her breath he heard her say, "the poor fools."

Later, alone, the King sat beside a deserted campfire. Most of his men had finally gone to what rest they could manage though sentries still patrolled the boundaries. Over the other side of the field he could still hear the noise and shouting from the French camp. He drew his borrowed cloak about him and shivered. He hoped that he had not led his army to disaster as the French seemed to believe and as many of his followers also believed but that his planning for this eventuality would pay off. He had had no success in extracting a promise from the Doctor to stay in the safety of the baggage train and had had to content himself with her promise to steer clear of the battle if at all possible. Gradually he realised his right hand was tapping in the dirt. He looked down and it jerked into life of its own accord and began to scratch in the dirt. Three words.

HUNT
ALONE
MORNING

He spoke quietly, "you think we should seek Moriarty before the battle, without the Doctor."

The hand scrawled again.

NO TALK
KILL

Holmes' thought was clear enough. The Doctor wished to negotiate in some way with the creature. She talked of capturing it but the King could not see how you could capture and hold the blue fire of these things. Holmes disagreed and it would be easiest to do this alone without the Doctor to get in the way and attempt to save Moriarty. If the Doctor were bypassed tomorrow morning and the thing bought to its end then there would be nothing left to do. She could remain safe among the luggage.

Early in the morning, only a short while after dawn, the King went to survey the enemy battle lines. They stood far enough from the French for the King himself to be unrecognisable. He didn't want to draw any attention except that of the Herald. Holmes sparked in the morning air. The King presumed

he was signalling in some way to gain Mountjoy's attention.

But. "My Lord!" the Doctor was marching towards them, her man Lytton only a few steps behind. They both had looks of grim purpose. The King noted that while she was armoured she had once more neglected to bring a weapon.

Her man was unarmed too. Lytton, as always, wore only a studded leather jerkin over his clothes.

"What are you doing?" she asked as if she did not know.

"We know which body Moriarty inhabits," replied the King. "Now is the time to strike before he changes. Before he moves on to someone more powerful and begins his reign of terror."

"Those are Holmes' words," she said.

"I agree with his assessment," said Lytton suddenly. "It would be better to have this thing over and done with quickly and cleanly. The creature is too much of a threat to this world. Incarceration is too risky."

The King agreed, "As a woman I can see that you might not have the stomach for this."

"Poppycock!" said the Doctor. "Any attempt to kill the host will be as messy and uncertain as other means. You are just too much the soldier to realise it."

"I'm so glad at least someone feels that way," said a voice suddenly. A form emerged from a pile of leaves by the Doctor's feet. A scruffy, wiry man with a grubby face and the air of a footpad grabbed her neck and held a dagger to her throat. The air crackled. "Now let's everyone be calm, or the pretty lady gets it."

The Doctor rolled her eyes with impatience, "Now I know how my companions feel," she grumbled.

"Let her go," said the King.

"I don't think so. Not until I can get a good shot at you. So if the soldier here will just move away slowly. That's good," he said as Lytton backed off like a cat. "And if you, my Lord, could just step closer."

"I think not," said the Doctor. She reached up and grabbed her assailant's arm and then bent forward throwing him easily over her shoulder. She held onto the arm and twisted the dagger out of his grip. The man cried out. The King judged that his arm had probably been broken by the manoeuvre.

"I'm not saying," she said as she stepped back, "that violence should never be used. Just that it should be a last recourse. Lytton! No!"

But Lytton was already thundering past her towards the prone man. He leapt upon the body and began throttling it. The man reached up and grabbed Lytton's head. Suddenly blue sparks started to flame and crackle round Lytton's body and to the ground. The Doctor had explained that these sparks could be deadly. Almost without thought the King leapt in, trying to drag Lytton clear. He felt a sudden jolt through his body as his hands closed on Lytton's shoulders. Then everything went black.

Lytton felt the hands on his shoulders and cursed. There was little he could do. Some of the insulation in his arms had burnt through and his muscles had spasmed making it impossible to release his grip on the man's neck. Most of his internals were still adequately protected but the insulation could not last forever. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Doctor taking a run up and then she jumped at the King, feet first. Her momentum knocked the King aside out of the flow of the current. Lytton hoped she'd have the sense not to try the same with him. With his arms locked solid there was no hope of her body weight dislodging him.

"...not concern," he heard the King's voice say in a stilted tone behind him, "Have heart, lungs work. Will survive."

He felt something inside him fizzle. The insulation was giving way. A sword suddenly appeared; the King's. The Doctor must have thrown it so it landed with its tip embedded in the ground. Its pommel wavered close to his head and the electricity from the man's hands arced to the sword and into the Earth. Free of the current, Lytton managed to force his hands open and staggered off the body. He lay on the ground a moment while the Cybermens' system pumped drugs around his body and healed the burns. He looked back and saw a streak of electricity run from the tip of the sword along the ground and away.

When he sat up the Doctor was kneeling over the cutthroat's body pumping his chest, trying to start his heart after the shock. "Lytton! See to the King," she said.

He walked over to the King's body. His eyes flickered open. "I can keep body alive," he rasped slowly, "but will die if leave it. I think is unconscious perhaps."

He helped the man up. The Doctor remained over the other body. Lytton helped the King sit and

they watched sceptically while the Doctor worked.

"He'd already jumped," said Lytton.

"Yes," agreed the creature in the King, "and escaped again. Left before body died. In woods somewhere."

It was fifteen minutes before the Doctor gave up.

The creature in the King's body fretted as they returned to camp.

"Doctor, no time for this. Should be hunting."

"If you leave this body it will die. It suffered too much trauma in the blast."

"What is King to me?"

"The battle begins soon and without him it is already lost. You only have to remain until his natural healing ability takes over. You have the muscle spasming and the nervous system under control. Once he wakes up he'll be right as rain... probably."

"Moriarty. Getting away."

"I don't think so. Expending so much energy trying to kill Lytton will have weakened him. He will be looking for another body. You may be able to survive long periods outside of them, but you are naturally symbionts. He'll be looking for a partner."

"More reason why should be looking. Able to siphon off enough current when King attempted to aid companion. Healed fully. Best him now."

"No. He may die if you leave the body now, as will his men. If you do this you are no better than Moriarty. You will effectively have killed him because he was in the way. You say that there is a difference between the two of you. Prove it to me! There will be time to hunt your criminal after the battle."

"Very well Doctor, trust you. But can not speak. What say to troops." This was true. Holmes had rapidly lost the rasping tone and his words had started to come faster. But he was clearly struggling with the language.

"I have thought of that," said the Doctor. "You are going to have to give a speech," she thrust a paper of hurriedly scrawled notes into his hands. "You start here `If we are mark'd to die, we are enow to do our country loss; and if to live, the fewer men, the greater share of honour...'. You had better practice it."

Lytton caught up with the Doctor as she was struggling into a suit of chainmail. He was surprised; she had worn nothing tougher than leather all campaign. She complained she couldn't move fast enough in chain or plate.

"You are going to fight in the battle?" he asked in surprise.

She gave him a sour look, "I'm going to have to hold Holmes' hand until the King awakes. I can't risk him being found out."

"I'll come with you."

"No, I need you to do something else. The history books can occasionally be wrong. I want you to be with the baggage train. Get the boys into the woods and get them hidden."

Lytton nodded carefully. He had no intention of staying to help the boys. The Doctor was a consummate liar but Lytton had studied the Doctor with interest in the past. She was going to seize the opportunity presented by the battle to hunt the fugitive on her own terms. Like Holmes he was deeply sceptical of the Doctor's plans to negotiate with Moriarty. But he knew there was no persuading her that the soldier's way was best. He resolved to follow.

The sounds of the battle drifted up from the field below. The Doctor winced in distaste; glad not to be a party of the slaughter history told her was happening on the field of Agincourt. She walked through one of the woods that flanked the English position. The woods that protected the archers from flanking by the French cavalry. Somewhere in here was the creature, Moriarty. Behind her, silent, crept Lytton. As always, he was watching her back.

"Come on Moriarty!" shouted the Doctor, "I know you're here somewhere!"

There can a crackling in the undergrowth. Very few people could have picked out the language and form within that noise.

"I'm not built to communicate in your fashion though I understand your speech. Moriarty seemed

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"Come on Moriarty!" shouted the Doctor, "I know you're here somewhere!"

There can a crackling in the undergrowth. Very few people could have picked out the language and form within that noise.

"I'm not built to communicate in your fashion though I understand your speech. Moriarty seemed

as good a name as any, given your plans."

Once again there was a crackling sound. Blue fire appeared round the edge of a tree, sparking up into the branches and around the roots.

"I can make a good guess. I imagine petty warlord would suit you. You can keep a human body alive much longer than its natural span. You can help it survive disease and violence. You could become very powerful with the right host."

Once more blue lightning writhed and crackled. Lytton, observing from the bushes, marvelled at the Doctor's ability to get even a spark of electricity to gloat.

"Well they haven't evolved in symbiosis with you so its hardly surprising that they have no defences against your total control is it?"

The creature moved from the tree and began to circle round the Doctor. It spread itself thin but the Doctor was ringed with pale fire.

"I propose a trade. This world is too young to cope with you but also too primitive to satisfy you. I'm offering you a lift out."

It flared a challenge at her.

"A King of a backward planet in a galactic backwater? Hardly making an impact I should say. I'm a Time Lord. Think on that Moriarty. I can take you to any time and place you choose. Somewhere in the future if you dislike the present."

The creature pulled itself back into itself. It became a towering flame of charge. The menace was palpable. To Lytton it was clear she had misjudged the situation. It was not going to accept her offer.

A look of concern crossed the Doctor's face, "Do not try to take me over. I am not so easily controlled as humans." She began to back away from the haze of electrical energy.

The blue fire surged forward towards the Doctor. Lytton charged from the undergrowth.

"Lytton! get back!" she shouted but he had already interposed himself between her and the electrical being. His body convulsed as he fought the control. Sparks began to coruscate over his surface as muscle and servo fought to resist the currents Moriarty sparked though them. He could almost feel the creature exploring the new body, experimenting with the systems, firing the muscles to see what they did. He started locking down what he could. He was determined not to become the Doctor's executioner but even as he did so he realised this was only a temporary measure. He was using electrical signals to set the locks. Sooner or later Moriarty would work out the signal to unlock them again. As he stood with his muscles twitching he saw the Doctor hauling the Leyden jar towards him. She grabbed a hold of the front of his tunic, holding the jar in her other hand and looked up into his face. He saw her wince with pain as electrical charge flickered around her hand. He saw the muscles contract so the fist closed tight, holding the front of his jerkin. But the charge did not earth itself or transfer to a new host. Moriarty had doubtless realised the advantages of this augmented body the Cybermen had cursed him with.

"The chainmail will act as a conductor," the Doctor shouted. "Lytton shut down as much as you can, force it to me."

Lytton began the internal hibernation process. He shut down off circuits and controls, the mechanics that ran his heart and his lungs. The world began to fade as the lack of oxygen affected his brain. Before it all went black he saw a sudden spark and heard the Doctor cry out as if from far away. Then he passed out.

When he came to she was knelt across his chest. His front panel was open and she was twisting wires together.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I jumpstarted you," she said, "I'm not sure you're going to be able to switch yourself off again. Just as well probably. Since all the mechanics in your brain have been disconnected, there was no way your body could keep it alive once the heart and lungs were shut down."

"I owe you my life again."

"I know," she said dryly. "It's a burden for both of us."

When they returned to the camp a sight of carnage met their eyes. The boys in the baggage train had all been slaughtered. Once last, desperate, act of revenge by the French attack had seen a small cavalry unit entered the undefended camp. The bodies of the young men lay scattered through the camp amid

the burning remains of tents and broken carts. There was a suppressed air of anger among the muddy soldiery. Life went on though. Already the first numbness of the shock had worn off and men were starting to gather together the dead and lay them out.

"History said this would happen," said Lytton.

"History can be wrong," she said. "I've seen it often enough. I would have saved these children." There was anger in her voice, "I told you to save them."

"You lied to me about your intentions."

"Not well enough clearly. I knew you did not trust me with Moriarty and would not let me go alone. I was right."

Ahead of them they saw the King. He was covered in the mud and blood of the battlefield and he looked both full of rage and full or weariness. When he saw them approach he stopped frighteningly still as if he was storing up energy against their meeting. "I was not angry," he said once they stood before him, "since I came to France until this instant."

The Doctor bit her lip, "You're back to yourself again then."

"I regained my senses the battlefield. 'Twas as well though this creature fared none too badly as a general," he brushed this aside. "Doctor, did you know this would happen?"

"I would have prevented it if I could."

"But you were bound by history," his voice was bitter.

The Doctor looked away and would not meet his eye.

"I thought you were soft and gentle, Doctor, but now I see that you are ruthless. You condemn me for waging a war against grown men and yet you let these innocents die."

The Doctor placed the Leyden jar she was carrying on the ground. "I have Moriarty," she said. She stood up and then held out a hand. "Goodbye, my liege, I shall be on my way now."

His mouth set into a hard line, but he took her hand. There was a crackle and blue fire sparked between them

"Goodbye Doctor," he said. Their hands parted. She picked up the bottle and walked away, Lytton at her side.

Behind them the King's voice suddenly carried on the air, "God guide you and keep you Doctor." Her lips twitched into a smile as they carried on.

"You could have told him it was my fault," said Lytton.

She shook her head, "What would have been the point? He is a man of war Lytton. We got on well enough while we avoided that point but it is fundamental to his nature and, that being the case, we could never have been more than fleeting friends. It is better this way."

"But I thought…"

"I never thought I would have a companion who thought too much. But it seems I should have been more careful what I wished for."

"I am also a man of war," said Lytton.

She nodded, not meeting his eye, "I realise that," she said carefully.

"And yet, you let me stay with you."

"Did I have a choice?"

Lytton smiled, "Not much."

"Besides you are a soldier not a man of war. It is an important distinction. "

Lytton surveyed the death around him and beyond in the mud-clogged battlefield. "This killing of the boys was not well done," he conceded finally. "I should have been here."

She looked up at him and smiled slightly, "You have to learn to trust me if you wish to be my companion."

"I know," he said. "I apologise."

"Apology accepted," she said.

Together they left the battlefield.

CVOK 21

Man of Smoke and Dust

by Sarah Hadley and Nick Campbell

I can see him.

If I look closely, around corners and through smoke, I can still distinguish his form.

Tall, enrobed in a thick black coat that nearly scrapes the ground, a dust-coloured muffler bustled about his neck. This is how I remember the Doctor, like a shadow in the night that comes and goes as it pleases, leaving no witnesses in its wake. He touches his fedora once, twice, in deference...and he has gone.

It was 2157 when the aliens invaded. Already they had taken London, Paris, Warsaw; Vienna was a logical continuation. They came down in their big saucers and took over our world, using the Prater as a base. They made the Great Wheel into a lookout; I picture them still, keeping sentries in those little cars on the Wheel, turning endlessly about. It may sound humorous, but I assure you that every man, woman and child of Vienna remembers it, and a shiver will run up their spine at the telling.

The aliens remained for twelve years. They set about killing those unfit to work for them, shipping the others to mines across western Europe or making them work in other ways. To this day, nobody can say exactly what the aliens wanted – they never explained. They simply *wanted*, and that was good enough. After all, we wanted ourselves; we wanted the chance to live.

I am making this very long, I know, but I want you to understand it fully. One thing you do not understand...no, listen, please...is that you think of the invaders as cold-blooded killers. This is not entirely so. They were far more calculated then that, far more. They kept you alive, the first time; paralysed your legs, let you linger a month, then killed you as a waste of time and food.

When the news came in from Britain that the rebellion had overthrown the aliens, it all turned to chaos. Our own underground surged forward, stormed the alien saucers, and brought all the invaders down in time. Not quickly enough, though. The aliens turned on the work camps, set their rays low and swept whole groups to the floor, so when the rebels found us, we weren't very much help.

And then, in the aftermath, the scientists had a revelation. They found scientific schematics in the ships, plans for a new line of alien casings. The plans were for spiders, with all-terrain legs and a special weaponry system. Soon, with funding from the Western European Coalition, we became high-tech men on horseback.

The Spiderweiss are not creatures or hybrids so much as another stage of evolution. Men and women sewed into machines, eight precision-foot legs and a suave hydraulic system that makes *kirsh kirsh* noises when it operates. We were established after the war as the new face of the law, the quiet predators of the night, and that's all very well, but there's more. We adjusted to these spider-legs and made them our own; we're not so much a new job option as a race.

My name is Johanna Adeli, *Leutnant* in the Viennese bureau of Spiderweiss. I have been working here since it was first established in 2173. I am twenty-nine years old, which means I remember the entire invasion very clearly, especially the part which led me to my unison with a Spider, but I wouldn't have it any other way; I consider myself very fortunate to be a Spiderweiss.

You want the whole story. You want to know where the Doctor comes into it. *Ja, ja.* Give me time.

The Beaufrragter called me to his office that Monday. He said he had a job, a real job with excitement and danger and a purpose. I hadn't had one in some time, so I was sure to show up...promptly, for once...and present the Beaufrragter with my most serious expression. How was I to know there'd be a new recruit?

Vaella, age twenty-one, so new she didn't even have a rank. She had a lot of enthusiasm, a natural desire to please, and had been sure to report to the Beaufrragter directly. It seemed Vaella had some twisted idea that if she got on the Beaufrragter's good side, she would quickly make it to a higher job status; little did she know! There's only two ways to climb the ranks with the Beaufrragter: one is my

way, the good way, the way that involves hardship and proof and risking your life; the other is messier.

"Adeli," said the Beaufrragter, having run his eyes over Vaella twice, "I have a very particular job for you. It's hard, real hard, and I don't know if I can trust anyone else." This was true. For all his vices, the Beaufrragter was not inclined to flattery. "Have you heard of the plague?"

"Which one?" I asked cuttingly, from the doorway. "The black plague, the red plague, the pre-Invasion plague..."

"Hundreds of hospital patients, predominantly lower class, diagnosed with a terrible disease." This was Vaella, chanting off like a ticker tape. "Affects the immune system, reducing it nearly to nil-point and exposing the subjects to various forms of cancer, sexually transmitted diseases and even the common cold." Vaella turned her face to meet mine. "They aren't safe from anything. I read the file."

The Beaufrragter took up the story. "We know it's a man, a man called the Doctor, who's introduced this virus. He seems to be a kind of drug runner."

"Boring alias," I noted.

"But good at his job." The Beaufrragter held up a file of photographs, selected one at random, turned it towards my view.

I flinched.

"You've got to catch him, Adeli. I have a full file on the symptoms and results, and I suggest you start off at Hoffman's Central Hospital; it's centralised there. We've got a lead, a boy named Theodor. Dirty boy. Lives in the sewers."

"I know him," I realised. "We've used him as a contact before."

"Get down there, then."

"Shall I accompany you?" asked the girl, looking expectant.

I gave her a sideways glance, not being very much on enthusiasm. "No."

As I approached the hospital, the sky was slick with fat raindrops. They spilled over the edges of the hospital roof, turning the granite a rich and glossy grey; they spilled across the heads of the hospital staff who stood in regiments, sadly smoking. I hurried to the door in almost a bound and never looked them in the eye. The doctors don't like the Spiderweiss, because we ask questions so easily, where they have learnt to keep their tongues down. Many of them stitched us into these metallic legs. I hear it made their fingers bleed.

It was after dinner when I arrived. Nurses were on their toes, drawing tall curtains across tall windows: the further I pressed in, the less light they allowed me. Trays of uneaten sandwiches lay scattered like cards around the ward beds. All I heard was the swish of the curtains, the swish of sisters' black skirts on the linoleum, the swish of cold breath through dead throats.

I took a young girl aside, barely taking in her pale, open face, open dark eyes; I asked her where I could find Theodor. She led me, dutifully, to a bed in a far corner.

"Yes," I told the girl, "he's the one." She hurried away somewhere.

I stepped closer and patted the boy soundly on the shoulder. "Theodor," I said, "it's time to wake up."

"Good morning," he replied, quite clearly. He began to sit up in the bed.

"It's evening."

He paused, for the briefest of moments, muttered: "Still evening," and then sat up very straight with his back against the plastic rails. He folded his arms. "You're Spiderweiss. It's rather reassuring to see you. I don't have any lover to visit me, you see."

"No, Theodor, I know you've met us very often before," I said, "but that's all to be forgotten now."

"Of course." He was smiling. I ground my teeth, and tried not to let him see it. "Since you've made this all above board, you can't deny me a cigarette. There's a packet under the mattress, near my feet."

Reluctantly, I felt for the box and handed it to him. "I've come to find out about the Doctor."

"Oh yes, him." He smiled, lighting his cigarette. "I miss him. He was so tender – no, not a queer, *Fraulein* Spider, but it's so rare that the people in my life remember my name. He seemed to care about people."

I wasn't confused, I was intrigued – but I didn't want to show him this. I affected a misconstruction: "But you're still sure," I whispered, "that it was his work that killed you."

He, of course, ignored me. "What a long time ago it seems that I first met the Doctor; can't have been more than a year. You know where I lived, that bone-yellow hotel? The night I met the Doctor, I'd been reading for a long time on the lavatory – the room had a lock, at least. I leafed through the crusty

pages, sets of peculiar black-and-white photographs, the print going in all directions.

"I wasn't busy that night, it turned out. I left the lavatory, curling downstairs on the twisty staircase, to my apartment. The Doctor was in there. You've not met him yet, I assume – but those raven clothes of his, those are what most people remember. His face, I can't recall - his face drifts on my memory, and other surgeons sit here often on my mattress, expectant.

"He said 'Good evening' and 'Was I busy' and 'Was I likely to be busy.' It was too late for the occasionals, too early for the regulars. He asked if I would like to make some quick schillings – I told him it was dollars or nothing. I said: 'Dollars or nothing, pal.' He corrected himself – he's only a visitor, you know. English. Barely speaks a word of the Dutch, calls it 'Double Dutch', says he learnt thousands of languages over the years but he's not been in Austria for a while. I suppose he'll be away again some time, if you don't find him. His name may stay behind, as it was there before I met him, in conversations I'd not been invited into.

So he said 'Don't be thinking it's anything underhand. You'll be at absolutely no risk."

And I said: 'I make it my business to be at no risk.'

And he told me it was 'A very sound philosophy' and that he'd only want 'A few trifling messages sent around Vienna.' Of course, you and I know –"

And he stopped.

Then he stabbed out his cigarette on the wall behind his ear, beside a handful of ashy splashes. He rammed it hard against the plaster, dropped the dead body of the cigarette to the floor, and rubbed his fingers together before selecting a fresh one.

"I ought to have them buy longer cigarettes," he said, "but they're so expensive, you know?" He lit this second one, a little chiming flame from a cherry-red lighter. "And they must like to know they're getting their dollar's worth – don't want to have to prop the damn things up in my lips when I eventually bite the dust, they can't have them." He grinned, and in my mind's eye, that grin seems the most substantial thing about him.

"At that time," he said, "with the Doctor," he licked his lips, "I would have wanted cigars. I really believed I was – *it*. The Doctor, he ran a service. This service was so below board, it was below sea level. He was an excellent businessman, though – he never really wanted for customers. I kept my nose clean, I listened at no doors, I read no sealed envelopes.

"I met people, yes. I never carried anything but a message, stowed safe in my head." He tapped the withered pomander with a gesture of pride. "I could go anywhere with my messages. I went to all the universities, seeing everything I'd missed – I went into all the high street stores, into the soup kitchens, into the libraries at their highest floors, into the coffee houses with the poets and their boys. I gave dates and codes and signals and, occasionally prices – only prices for the rich, my dear. Everybody else, they had to give him other things.

The place I told them about – yes, that was always the same. The Doctor haunted the sewers like a phantom or, I suppose, a tourist – he was besotted with them. Something about them he considered kept him safe. Once, he said:

'When I first came, I arrived here – the dark hid me then. My home, it's still around here somewhere, around one of these murky corners. It shifts sometimes, if the tide is high – it's carried from shadow to shadow. I like to know it's here, should I ever want to go.'

"He meant the service hatches – if you know where they are, you can go from the eternal, wet underground night to the rushing, singing city streets in a moment, unseen. The Moran Bookshop on Thursday; the New Neuer Markt on Friday; and always the Kirche Bar for green Veltliner and Lungenbraten, when he could get in. I suspect he rents hotel rooms around the city, moving from room to room, from pseudonym to pseudonym – Doctor von Wer and his beautiful lady assistant. Yes, his very beautiful lady assistant …

"Once, I was told to take a message to some Maria or other. He was a young man, squeezed himself into leather and tiger-skin (but was, of course, a very tame vegetarian) and kept his legs quite painfully together. His lids were lashed like garden rake-prongs; they leant forward very charmingly when I said I had an appointment for his Doctor, cried with a laugh of anticipation.

"I asked the Doctor about it. 'Why does Maria want to take your medicine? She's happy where she is.'

"He said 'Don't you think you could be happier, Theodor?'

crushed and bled and sucked and strained through his chemical equipment, while all around him was so slick and reassuringly Murnau-inspired, especially without his brand new fedora. I couldn't tell you a thing about his laboratory. I only remember him, and even that is indistinct. He's faded away.

"I barely remember even that first time of the needle thrust into my arm."

He smiled at me, horribly consciously. I was a little offended.

"So," I said, "he took care of you and bought you things, and you're not going to –"

"Tell you where he is? Tell you where he's gone?" He couldn't keep the smile there for very long; he was a little prima donna. "My dear, that's one of the things I really don't know. Probably," he said, "because I don't want to and I never really want to. That's what I'd like to think. If I did know where he was, I might tell you. And, well, it just wouldn't help me or you."

"Why wouldn't it help me?"

"Because you'd never find him," he said. "He'd be gone before you went. You'd find the Devil at home before you found the Doctor. Actually," he added darkly, "that might not make sense, if you catch my meaning. I think he sometimes visited the church just above...the old one, the no-longer-in-fashion one on Braun Street...but whether it was to confess or to find a new body, I don't know." His eyes flashed theatrically. "Perhaps the Doctor inhabits other people's bodies, Fraulein. What if he inhabits yours?"

I was in no mood for this. "So I just go down and search the sewers? Is that where to find him?"

"Have you been down there before?" He shook his head. "No. The Doctor found his patients, but he never let anybody catch up with him, even the girl that hung around with him, the English girl."

"You didn't mention her."

"Didn't I? She never held much interest for me...must have been the Doctor's tart, or something. She wasn't his wife. She could have been the Doctor, but I doubt it. I can't imagine what kind of child the Doctor would make."

"What was her name?"

"Cosette something, if it helps. I can tell you anything I want, now."

"Yes, just now you can," I agreed, and bade him goodnight.

You can put a monkey in a cage, and the cage in a cage, and at hospitals, they do.

Down the corridor; in, in, in. The strange feeling in the hospital was of being crammed in closer and closer with the other tightly compacted patients. They pushed you up against the smell, against the wall, onto the lav, onto the garden. They poke the food, hard, into your throat. Prod, prod, prod and poke. They have to make use of their time and space is at a premium, so down the corridor: in, in, in.

I knocked, turned the handle and was inside, even before he'd said "Come in, won't you?" Dr Cruiks' office was small too, but definitely clean. There were many waxed surfaces – even the fruit in the straw basket on his desk was thoroughly waxed. There was a very expensive painting on the wall, but otherwise the place was unornamented. I crept, with two forelegs, deeper inside, closing the door behind me, drawing up a chair and resting my back against its. "Thank you for agreeing so promptly, Doctor," I said smartly. "I'm sure many of my colleagues will remember this keen compliance, should you ever ask them to."

Cruiks still had his back to me. I couldn't see what he was doing – he was a big man, furred with lacklustre white hair enough to put you in mind of some out-of-season Santa Claus.

Jesus, now *I* use that awful Americannerish.

He turned suddenly, and I saw him shake some little fly out of the window, drawing the pane back again. He put down the newspaper he'd been employing in his task, smiled across at me, took a seat so that his eye-level was lower. He had to look up to speak to me. "How goes your investigation?"

"It seems," I said, "I've been told a lot that I already know."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Join me in a cup of coffee?" He got up, and gestured toward a steamy percolator. Given even that it was not an appropriate time, I bet he made revolting coffee. His every movement seemed informed, his every word. I had a nigh-on twenty years of protocol to fall back on. His politeness, his evident benevolence; these things seemed stage directions in a script I didn't want. I was not going to act with it, either, as others might have done. Call me cynical. Indeed, yes, his actions were the actions of an affable old doctor.

"No thank you," I said. "Actually, I'm glad to have the paperwork confirmed. There's time wasting, and then there's the gap between a man's tongue and his words. Only one goes into the miles." I

tapped the chair leg with one of my own, absently. I watched Cruiks. He only laughed gently at my little joke.

"I'm sure," he replied, filling his cup. "It's a terrible business, anyway, in many ways. If you get my meaning, I hope you will not need to mix with either its progenitors or its victims during the course of your enquiries."

What an interesting thing to say, I thought, but I only replied: "The children." I couldn't afford to evade the topic.

"Babies," he corrected, very kindly. He put down his cup, ran a hand across his face, through the hairs and into the valley between nostril and lip. He made smothered, discomforting noises.

I sniffed. "I see the details unsettle you. Perhaps I should not ask you to look," I licked my tongue around a tooth, "closer."

He balanced his elbows on the table and hefted his head into his hands. "Just over half a year, and it's an epidemic."

I tried to specify my inquiries. "The death begins in the city, but the plague? It all begins here."

"We *saw* it first," he replied sharply, correcting me again.

"And now it's everywhere you look," I said, "if you know what you're looking at, obviously. It's in every hospital. It's in bedrooms, hotel rooms, nursery rooms. You know, it's even been found in some quarters of the National Zoo."

"I haven't seen anything like it since the Invasion," he said, using his whole jaw to produce the words. He must have noticed the expression on my face. "Well, you must have been very young then. Where were you?"

"In the heart of the city, quite close in," I told him, "Far enough away from here."

"Yes," he said. "Down among the toppling skyscrapers and the shuddering churches."

"You speak almost with nostalgia," I told him bluntly.

"Do I?" He looked into his coffee. "I think it must be the wrong time in the day for coffee, you know. Could we perhaps continue this conversation outdoors?"

A light, dark rain, the points of a thousand needles, tickled my eyes and eyelashes. A cool wave breaking over us. There were gardens fenced by thorny desiderata, some black with empty soil, others gifted with shrubs and bushes, green fractals being made blue. One bush even had a bloom, shaking under the rape of the rainfall and the armlengths of rain it teemed along.

"Do you mind this?" Cruiks waved the black bowl of a pipe at me. I shrugged. "If we go to the herb gardens you won't smell it," he said, "and it's far enough away from the workmen for you to have some peace."

I forced myself to walk slowly beside him, though I was in a stormy mood. Funny how nostalgia's like a whirlpool, tempting you to swim deeper and deeper down, as you wish for the strength to swim away. The floral, beefy smell of Cruiks' smoke snapped me from my reverie.

"Have you heard anything about this shadowy 'Doctor' figure?" I asked. "He seems an equal dose of rumour, hearsay, even swagger."

"The Doctor?"

"That's right. Do your patients mention him?"

He chuckled. "To tell you the truth, I think a doctor is the least probable entity for one of these people to see. These people, they suffer from strong delusions, hallucinations. They've seen monsters, ghosts, all kinds of things. One man," he added, sucking on the pipe, "has seen the Old Gentleman himself."

"Oh yes?"

"If we were to believe *him*, Lucifer was visiting our humble hospital at least twice a day. Presumably bearing grapes and magazines." He smiled. "Who has been speaking of a Doctor?"

"More than one person," I said. "Theodor, for example."

"Theodor will be dead before midnight. You want to believe him?"

"But –"

"Frau Spiderweiss, I really don't know why you're speaking to me. Surely you've read all my notes already?"

Since we were walking, since he was a Doctor, since I was Spiderweiss, I had no need to look him in

the eye. The darkening sky almost seemed to rob my attention. "I've been over them thoroughly, a couple of times. Interesting that so few were originals, or even photocopies. Many typewritten transcripts."

"But you, of course, understand the documents relate to information which is greatly confidential?"

"No need to patronise us, Doctor. We're not your patients, your nurses, your fat-cigar governors. We're Spiderweiss."

He shook his head like an angry fish, with his pipe still gripped in his mouth like a black hook. "I really do not know what you mean."

"And don't be so scared. All I'm talking about is discretion."

"You're talking about discretion? You're asking me about censorship. The events, the situations..."

"Too graphic for the steel stomachs of the Spiderweiss?" I couldn't restrain a wire smile. He really did sound scared, as if the smoke had got into his voice. "What's that line about your first patient? 'In autopsy, incisions [by some instrument or object of applicable form] were found over blood vessel a5'."

"Oh, you want plainer language." He cleared his throat. "A young father was found, spread out in a gutter, forced into a rictus which threatened to snap his spine. He appeared ravaged: his skin was mushroom pallor. When he was brought in here, we found two punctures, like tooth marks, right over an artery just under the hand – very clean wounds. We scheduled him for a blood transfusion. He was dead before the night was out."

"But where did your autopsy occur? Some kind of chemical test of his pieces? And yet your records read differently. You must admit, the way you've handled this whole thing is highly suspicious, especially in as grave an epidemic as this."

"Who do you want to put in your cell?" he asked. "The bastards who began this? Or the doctors, working to stop their work?"

"One bastard at a time," I said.

He spat his pipe into his hand and kicked at the ground: an old, red-faced baby, rattle in hand. A breeze, hard as ice, reached right across the gardens and flapped my coat about, so I hugged it into my arms, still staring at the sky and waiting.

"You don't believe me, you don't believe that I've told you the gory truth."

"I don't believe that a single bogey-man has begun a city-wide epidemic."

"Bogey-man? He's that ephemeral? Or that scary?"

"All we know is that he's a doctor," I said, "so perhaps you've a new reputation to live up to. Could it surprise you, Doctor, that you're not just another angel of mercy to me?"

He said: "On my hands –"

I said: "There's blood on your hands."

He said: "I've done nothing wrong. There's paperwork behind me."

I said: "You have no authority to remove parts for your own or anybody else's research, to sell them, eat them, paint them or otherwise. Whatever you are doing with them, I want it stopped. Your official tests are inconclusive – I'm sure you'd find another way of writing them up and leaving out the gory details for me. The original notes are going into a private file, nein?"

He said: "Sometimes, things are just as they seem." A burning scent of mint suddenly bit into our heads. We were in the herb garden. He looked at his watch.

He only turned, and there I was: gone.

I didn't look back; I was caught in thought. I thought about the boy, turning slowly to a heap of ash on the plastic bed. I thought about the drugs drizzling across the underworld, making blood bitter. I thought about Cruiks, stinking of poppies. I thought of the mysterious Doctor, and dived back into the city.

The night was waiting for me there, and the signs were up, and the rain was coming down and bursting in clouds around my feet. I slowed, creeping down, closing in to join the skipping shades that weaved around me.

Was the Doctor here? He may have been, he must have been. But who would have known it? His patients? Cosette? Certainly not the Spiderweiss. We didn't know what had happened to him.

The flower shops were closing up, green furs slinking back inside. Bookshop shutters clattered shut. Lanterns bloomed overhead, just as net curtains raked across home lights.

I paused outside a jeweller's, peering through the dirty glass at chains of gold and gobbets of plastic pearl. The car headlights stroking the back of my head seemed to linger on each link in each chain, then

dance away in a nearby window, flat bubbles of grey light. It was all sheen on a dull surface to them. Only *I* knew that there was something underneath, but what? I thought: Sticks! I need something to drink.

And, if you've been listening to my story carefully, you'll know exactly where I went next.

The Riche Bar loomed up before me: a shadowy maw, gummy. To be fair to the Doctor, before the Invasion it would probably have been one of the more respectable bars in Vienna at the time. Before the Invasion, vice and sin had become too commercial to be smelled, to be tasted. In the re-building, they weren't sold but stolen; it all seemed new. When the Doctor first came to town, he would have found it a task to frequent anywhere very clean.

I *kirshkirshkirshkirsh*ed up to the door. Only as I pushed my way inside – past the dark surfaces, into the pregnant lights beyond – did my reflection appear: a series of blades, a concrete face, a frozen waterfall of hair.

Inside, I met my reflection again, thousands of times – there were mirrors in the little hall, set facing each other. There were mirrors in the body of the bar, one behind the bar, one facing it. In their knowing, mutual stare I saw many rows of the same woman, her suddenly angry eyes, her hands deep in her pockets. Around her head and through the needles of her spidercage, Turkish cigarette smoke threaded and unravelled. Around her, people looked up, studied her as well as I did. Some looked suspicious, hushed their voices, hid their drinks, tried to keep their faces down, but their friends always said the same thing: "If she's come in here alone, she's nothing to worry about." And she wasn't, so I didn't worry, and we headed to the bar, not looking at ourselves any longer.

The Barman was alone at the bar, watching a vamp above our heads. He looked at me, almost mockingly (but I understood and didn't make any comment). I said politely: "Give me a green Veltliner," adding, "in very broken German."

The Barman, surprisingly young, creased up his face. "What are you trying to say?" He used little, weightless words – his pink lips rippling in the midst of the bloodless music punches. He had a little bruised scar, smiling tightly underneath his mouth.

"Why not pour me my drink," I said, carefully sitting down on a barstool and crossing my legs mechanicoquettishly. "I'll give you plenty of time to think about it." Glass thudded against ice. The alcohol dribbled in among the shards. "I don't believe I'll have to talk for you." Like the others, I didn't try to keep eye contact with anybody, my glances lashed around the room and I let all those illicit conversations gurgle around my ears. There was nobody to know, and nothing much to recognise in any face.

"You know what they're all wondering, don't you?" said the Barman, leaning in and stroking my cheek.

"Yes," I said, brushing his hand away.

"Well?" he said. "I'm wondering too. For obvious reasons, but not theirs."

"Haven't you seen me here before?" I asked, a touch haughtily. "Haven't I been here before?"

"I'm sure I'd remember," he said. "If you're genuine Spiderweiss, you'd tell me by the sound of dollar bills rustling. If that is a costume, or whatever the fakes get in to these days, you'd remember the smell of my breath."

"I've been Spiderweiss since the Invasion. You could say, I've been Spiderweiss since I was born. So I don't want your money, whatever you've got going on here."

"You're not here for pleasure though," said the pervert, with a sad smile. "You wouldn't be ordering another man's drink if you were."

I rolled my eyes with interest.

"Austrians have always made the best booze in the world," he said loudly, "but they wouldn't know the good stuff if it was forced down their throats. Go on," said the Barman. I looked down at my drink. "Ask me a question about that ghoul, go on."

"What can you tell me?"

He laughed. "You don't ask much, do you? Well, he's not been in yet. Sorry." His eyes were on the vamp now. I looked patiently into my drink. "I'll tell you what you must already know, the man's a fruit-loop. Like you, he comes here for talk – and a little business, if he can get it. And he can. You'll know that also."

"Has he ever peddled his material in here?" I asked.

"Not to my knowledge," he said, licking his lips. "He did, and he'd be out. No, he just made his appointments. He'd slip inside some conversation like I don't know what, and they'd all be nodding:

nod, nod, nod, that's where it always finished. A smile, perhaps a handshake, those leather gloves of his ..." The way he watched that dancer, I noticed, she might have been the view from a window. "Some folks have come back since. Plenty haven't. Nothing suspicious in that, not in Vienna in the autumn."

"That drug's a killer," I said sharply.

"Please," he said, "spare me that," he said, "I see killers every night, embracing their victims. Half of them out there tonight are dead." I looked back into the lights and shadows, I heard him tap my glass. "That stuff's lethal enough. If your friend didn't have the constitution of an ox, by the time he'd put a bottle of it down his neck, he wouldn't have been able to *spell* 'constitution' even if he could pick up a pen."

"How often has he been in here?" I asked.

"Every other night or so," said the Barman near incredulously, "for nigh on the last damn year. Believe me, if that guy isn't dead from the waist down by now, he's dead *all* the way down. Looks enough like a *nosferatu*."

This talk I didn't like. It's been a worry for me, since the Invasion, a silly childish worry perhaps: the way the legend of the *nosferatu* has never managed to die out. It seems to haemorrhage into every culture I've heard of, in most histories I've read – and when it turned up in our new culture, in our new society, rising from the ashes, tainting the dreams of the city... Even Theodor, that high-culture sewage, had seemed influenced by it. *Perhaps the Doctor inhabits people's bodies...*

Anyhow, I changed the subject. "If he's dead from the waist down, why does the girl hang around with him?"

"The Devil alone knows," he sighed. "Perhaps she's another one of these necrophiliacs."

"Did she ever speak to you?"

"A little," he said, "I never got anywhere. Got the idea she was some English child, holier than a priest. She'd wink at the guys, but she'd never go over, she was stuck like glue to her friend the Doctor."

"That's the name he used?"

"That's the name everybody used. You heard it everywhere. You still hear it, if you listen close enough. He wasn't a real Doctor though, no know-how, no qualifications."

"How d'you know?" I asked.

The Barman leant closer in. "One night, in the week, not so many folks in – Marlene's not doing her thing. It's pretty quiet, and the Doctor comes in, that girl on his arm. You hardly noticed him until he got your attention, he'd just say 'Slow night, Jo," and the sound'd stab at your heart, soft as it was...

'Slow night, Jo.'

I look up. He's pulling off his muffler, unwinding it like a fat snake, and pressing it into his pocket. Cosette, with her little round face, she's holding his hat, fanning herself with it. She doesn't look at me.

'It's slow,' I say, 'It's quiet. I don't hear the coins rattling in my till.'

'Let me assist you in that area,' he says, 'but it'll have to be a dry, papery rasp instead, sadly.' His thin mouth makes this little smile, but he doesn't hold it like that for long. Never much more than polite. I give him his drink.

'How's your stay?' I ask, for talk. 'Is that Ingrid giving you any trouble?'

He tells me everything is *wonderful* with Chez Ingrid; especially that she is loving to play Mozart at the crack of dawn. I think he's being a kidder, but he's saying he's a *terrible* one for keeping time, and she helps mark out the days for him.

'And are you keeping well, Jo?' he asks me, and I tell him about my back and my head and these sleepless nights. He says: 'Sleepless nights, Jo? Bad dreams, Jo?' I laugh. I say, 'Last night it was a real nightmare.'

He says 'Do you have these dreams often, Jo?"
I say: 'It's not bad dreams I'm having.' He still doesn't get it, so I'm telling him casually about Big Bess with the tattoo of Professor Shreck's Time Machine on her thigh, and he's getting very flustered, and I make my apologies. I'm trying to calm him down – and he's apologising too.

He's saying, 'Oh, I'm an astrologer, I'm this, I'm that, I've seen something in the stars.' He stops then, very suddenly, and says, 'Jo, something bad could be coming your way.' He tips this drink down his neck, says he's going outside for a moment. Cosette stays - Cosette always stays for conversation and when I watch the Doctor, he's weaving around, talking to people at each table.

'I think you're awful,' says Cosette.

I call her frigid and a silly English druggie. She doesn't speak much Austrian. The Doctor, he's bad enough – 'It's my first visit since the war,' he says, 'my University education doesn't stretch too far.' - but Cosette, she's got about four words.

'I think you're awful,' she says.

I serve a few more drinks, and I'm trying to flirt with Cosette and her four words, and I hear these screams. They're frail little screams. Cosette whirls around, wails 'Doctor, Doctor!' in English. Sure enough, out of this little whirlwind comes the Doctor, carrying a young woman. This young woman, she is shaking and shaking. I tell the Doctor he can carry her through to the next room, and he heads on through, and Cosette and I follow him. My son's out on the bar.

So, this woman's on the floor, because the Doctor's just pinning her there.

I say 'Did you give her something a bit too strong, Herr Doctor?" I'm really very angry, but I'm scared too. The Doctor just holds her there, and I'm certain I see something shining in her cheeks. I lean closer, I gather in close.

Now, you Spiderweiss, you wouldn't believe this if I gave you ten of those Veltliners, but her *face*, her *face* was getting so pale, pale and shimmery, as if the bone were climbing *through* the skin, but this bone was shaking like bubbling mercury.

This metal kind of bone, it suddenly opened up with all these mouths. These mouths *screamed*, *Frau* Spider, a terrified scream. The woman's mouth was opening, and she was still trying to scream, but I saw, rising up her throat, a new tide of silver, reaching for her teeth, which rattled like an icebox: rattle rattle rattle, scream scream scream, that woman's breath just being locked in. Her nostrils, there was blood bubbling there.

'Doctor, Doctor!" says Cosette again and again, she's so helpless – and the Doctor reaches into a pocket and he pulls out a big syringe. He slaps at this woman's writhing wrist, he grabs it tight, and he plunges this needle in, quicker than I can look away –

Yes, I would rather not have seen –

And he presses the plunger *right* down. Blam. And the woman's head bounces back, and the metal slakes off her skin, leaving little white puckers.

But let me tell you, that medicine did her no good. She was dead as dead. I said 'What's the point? Why do that to her? I could have had an ambulance here in twenty minutes.'

The Doctor says 'What's the harm in calling one now?' He says: 'We can have a drink while we wait.'

"What do you think you saw?"

"I think," he said, "I think that I saw the Doctor put some woman out of her misery precisely because he wanted to do something, and knew nothing about what he had to do. Don't forget Cosette – don't forget his audience."

The music had grown louder by this time, rolling like a storm against the back of my head. I saw his hands were sweaty, I saw he had begun to mop at them with his glasses cloth. "What do you think was happening to the girl?"

"Something terrible," he told me, "but there's enough of that about."

"These days," I said.

"Oh sure," he said, "Sure." He didn't believe it was any different before the Invasion. He didn't believe in anything, I'm sure. He didn't believe in anything, except that the Doctor was a *nosferatu*, and that was about the only thought I could have entertained at the time. Stupid really, to have been so blind. But you can see, we both were.

I asked him to write down Ingrid's address. He scribbled in on a page torn off the calendar – it must have passed midnight during his story. I folded the page, put it in my coat.

At the door, a man in a cream suit looked me in the eye. He said something, and I didn't hear the words, but I saw them in the twilights: "We should talk."

We left for the night, for the dark streets and the cool air. The sky was a far richer purple than it had been before, spattered with dust-grey clouds.

My friend offered a hand. I shook it. It was very cold. Perhaps he'd only just stepped in out of the night. "You know the Doctor."

"Yes," he said, his voice twanging New York professor, shuddering like an accent he was trying to

lose. "I thought that's what you were asking about." His teeth were shiny; they suddenly bit down into a long cigarette. A dragonfly appeared between us with the body of a woman, green copper. With a flick of his thumb, the New Yorker opened the woman's mouth and a flame blinked up, turning and turning. Fire crawled into the embers of the cigarette's toe. "Join me, Inspector?" There was a packet in front of me. I moved to take one, but stalled my hand and waved them away. "Temptation," he mumbled around the cigarette. "It's a peculiar indulgence, isn't it, restraint? Well." The box lid closed, the box disappeared.

"You know what the Doctor's done?"

The New Yorker giggled. "Inspector, I know what the Doctor *does*."

"It's so funny, is it?" I snapped. "He tells jokes?"

"Interesting you should put it that way, but no." Still a trace of the giggle in his voice. "I know the Doctor's activities – he's showing the dead another way of dying. The living, too. Their blood, Inspector; it's all swirling about around here, one way or another."

"And your relationship with the Doctor?"

"I've heard of the Doctor a thousand times," he replied smartly. "We all have. For a man without a name, he seems to get around a great deal. I've only met the man once. I never want to see him again."

"Go on," I said.

"Saw him at the Kirche. I'm an entertainer, for my sins. I can sing everyone's favourites, impersonate all the greats, but in the Kirche Bar, my specialty is a conjuring act. Do you like those, Inspector?"

I told him to go on with his story.

"He shook ash at his feet. "I float a beautiful woman in the air, I produce scarves of all nations from unlikely places, and I won't ask if you're impressed – this particular night, I accidentally invited the Doctor up on stage. Of all the people I could have called up!"

He looked up at the sky, spewing white smoke in front of his face. His eyes were hazel; they shone.

"Of all the people, and then of all the tricks I had ready: the mind-reading act. Trick cards, you know the kind of thing? I produce the cards. He shuffles one. He hands them back, I ask him to pick a card. He selects the card, displays it to the crowd. No, no, it's all relevant, Inspector. Sometimes everything can be relevant, which is a terrifying thought to such as I.

"He replaces the card in the pack. I shuffle it again. He places the pack in his pocket. I draw my revolver, draw back the hammer: there's a colossal explosion, the crowd's confused, what's going on? Worried faces everywhere.

"The Doctor takes the pack from his pocket. He reaches inside, pulls out a card, the only card with the smoky hole in it. 'Is that your card, Doctor?' I say, I say it with all the theatricality, and do you know what the crowd say? 'No!' And the Doctor? He says 'No' too! It was some other card.

"Inspector, there's no way that trick could go wrong. It's all written out in the instruction booklet. I'm intrigued. During my break, I track down this Doctor. I ask him how he did it, he says 'Do you really want me to spoil the magic for you, Mr Burke?' Funny guy. We get into conversation."

"And he offers you his drugs."

"Let me be candid, Inspector," said Burke, "I haven't always done the trick cards. Late last year, it was time pieces – you could be wearing one now – but it's also been chinaware, electroniqua, literature..."

"Oh yes?" I said. "You'd be surprised how unsurprised I am, Mr Burke, and how uninterested."

"The Doctor knew all this," said Burke.

"How did he know?"

"Could be common knowledge to some people," he said with a shrug, "He'd have to know the right people – but perhaps the Doctor knew everyone. Everyone important."

"He asked you in on his racket?"

"Yeah," he said nervously, "but I'm clean now. I was clean then. He wanted contacts. I said no. He wanted code words. I said no."

"You're coming out of this very well, Mr Burke."

"Am I?" he smiled, right into my eyes. "That's kind of you, Inspector, very kind. Of course, I've not always been bright about doing things, but I knew something was fishy when it smelled fishy, and that business really stunk of herring. So I told the Doctor: 'Doc, I don't want in on this. In fact, you carry on, I'm going to have to let some people know.' This gets him scared: 'Oh no, Mr Burke, that won't have to happen,' he says, and he squeezes my shoulder like this, kind of gentle and reassuring, and he leans

in close, like this. He tells me, 'Burke, don't even try to think about the terrible things I can do to people who interfere with my work. If you get in my way, you get in terrible trouble – there are reasons for certain actions.' He started to scare me. He started to scare me, like this."

Like that. Like his eyes; moony bright, like his smile.

"And I said, 'I'm strong, Doctor, I'm going to stand up to you, you're not going to get the better of me. And the Doctor, he scared me, like this."

Like that. Like a crow flying straight at your face, a toothy grin in his mouth, a cigarette in his grin.

"And I lost it, I completely lost it."

Like that. Like the night tumbling down, crashing twin-bladed deep into your eyes.

"I lost it, like this. It was gone."

It was gone, like that.

"Gone, just like that."

Like that.

"Good night, inspector," said a voice, and I don't know even know where that voice was coming from even now, because whether I was asleep or awake at that point – it came from just behind my ear, and my head was thrown back.

I swayed, in among my legs.

I dreamed I met the Doctor, and then I dreamed I fell asleep …

And I awoke to find that it was not a dream. Slumped along the sidelines, dishevelled in spider-legs leaning against a wall, I heaved to the right and re-balanced. The hydraulic power *slusshhed*, displeased.

Gone, just like that. I could hear the nasal tones, the mocking voice.

The Doctor.

I reached into the pockets of my long coat, drifting down below my cut-off waist like drapery, and found what I knew was there: a complete lack of address for Chez Ingrid. The Doctor had drugged me with his smoke and taken it, bounding off into the night before I could pounce.

We are the ones who know no rest. We are the people with eyes everywhere, deep and unblinking, and venom that kills. We are Spiderweiss. You cannot trick us; we can feel every strand of the city's web beneath steel-lined toes.

Yet somehow his memory made me question those things.

Kirsh. Kirsh. I sloshed to stand over a water puddle, looked at my ragged features. I saw two sets of legs.

Up, and over. A second Spiderweiss, in the corner of the bus stop, caught tight up in its knees. The sign of a dormant Spider, catching a nap. I went to it and observed the haystack shape of drawn-up legs obscuring a human form.

"Vaella." The Spiderweiss newly assigned, the one who was so eager.

"Vaella." Nothing.

"Vaella." This time, I reached out and pressed against the legs, working against the servos to pull them apart. I couldn't see Vaella's face; had the Doctor found her and drugged her, too?

One front leg snapped off brutally, crashed to the ground. Water – no, some stickier substance – seeped from the joints and onto the ground. The entire body lilted, and already I knew what to expect. The other legs prised open just enough for me to see…

Blood-spattered features, matted hair, wild eyes. I had seen the face before, on others. Vaella had died in the same way as those, by the Doctor's hand, and his fatal drug. Not a disease this time; an intentional overdose or perhaps a rejection by her body. Why was I so special? Why take this girl's life?

The other Spiderweiss capsized and bore down on me. Heaving, I managed to stabilise it upon its remaining legs, propped the girl's body as much as I could against the wall. It was sad to see, human and legs separated in such a manner by lack of muscle. Still connected…but no longer as one.

I felt sick as I turned to find a telephone. I had to call HQ before I went home, report Vaella, bring someone to bundle up her parts and take them away. I had reached a dead end, but I knew now what that the man I sought represented true danger. If he could get to Spiderweiss, none of the city was safe…and neither was I. I felt lucky to have escaped him, a bad luck that precedes a worse death.

I needed to rest.

The next morning I dressed quickly. The night had brought a possibility to my mind - the fleeting possibility that, as Theodor suggested, the Doctor visited the church on Braun Street. At very least, the congregation might have seen him, might know where he kept his secrets.

The legs of a Spiderweiss go very fast when they want to, speeding across pavement lighter than air, and they are very strong - but they are not invincible. I was reminded of this rudely when I found the church; it was in the old section, surrounded by the cobble and kipple of the bomb raids, and it occurred to me then that I might not find anyone alive. Still, I reasoned, it was worth an effort.

I gave myself a leg up the kipple, torn and battered from the grand old church the structure used to be. It reminded me of a broken dollhouse, exposed to the cold.

Kirsh, kirsh, kirsh. Up and over I went, descending to the stone floor. The squares had cracks between them; I had to be careful not to push my leg in one and throw myself forward. The entire church was sad with time and neglect, pews only half there, stained glass muddied and warped. Shadows spread like a black disease to blot out the distinguished angles and curves of the walls, stretching up to a ceiling full of holes. The aliens had done their sort of magic to it…a dark magic, evil and filled with death.

"Why do you desecrate the House of God?" A thin, reedy voice, off to the side. I turned my head and saw a man to match the voice, very small and unimpressive. He had thick plastic spectacles, very cheap and ungainly, that gave him the look of a tortoise.

"I was not aware of desecration." The huge ruins of the church engulfed his form, but for once I felt like the fly in the spider's web, picking her way across the sticky strands with care. He was in the clearing, awaiting my coming, and even the prowess of my size and my science could not help me. "I come as an agent of Vienna Spiderweiss, to find a mass-murderer."

"You will find no murderers here, heathen." He did not move.

I pulled my front legs up instinctively. "Why am I not allowed in a House of my own God?"

"You have no God."

"I assure you, Father, I do."

"And you may not call me by my name." He closed his eyes and made sickly familiar motions across his chest. "No agent of the Dark One shall taint my soul, and none shall taint His House, and all shall be recognised for the creature they represent…"

"I was told that my God would always love me, protect me, and accept me, and I believe He does." I wet my lips to fight the dust of kipple. "I haven't time for theological discussion, Father. I am looking for a man who calls himself –"

"You shall taint no man here."

I raised my voice. "A man who calls himself the Doctor. He is poisoning children, men, and women across the city with a drug. I have been ordered to catch him if I can." I sighed. "Don't you have any feeling for the people? I may be the only one who can stop him."

"Selfishness."

In seconds I had clambered over the remaining rubble and sat hovering at the priest's eye level. "To you, Father, I may be an abomination…a dead woman who refused to die…and I am not a messiah. But at least I can do my job, and at least I *care*." I found my face heating up and water brimming under my eyes. "I have been asked before why I thought the Church was dead and I told them it was not – but now I believe otherwise. If a Man of God does not care for his people who will really stop the demons? Not you, for certain; you are too blinded by your hate."

He looked at me, unblinkingly – looked at me with some expression of interest. "I will answer your questions," he said slowly, "but only if you leave directly afterward, and never come back."

"I will."

"You know your man was here?"

"I heard something about it, but I have no confirmation. A tall, thin man, sallow face, de-saturated clothing. A languid voice and cold eyes."

"I know him."

He sighed. "He was…a very quiet man. The third man I'd seen that day at confession. Very unusual."

"Continue."

"I didn't see him at first. He blended into the wall like the night…"

"Good evening, Father."

"The weather's not so good."
"No."
"I see you would like to talk a little."
"I'm afraid my German may be broken to some extent."
"Oh yes? I shall listen as closely as I can then, child. You have some burden?"
"Does it show?"
"Is it of your own making?"
"I'm sorry?"
"Is it your own work?"
"My fault? Is it my fault?"
"That's close to what I mean."
"Ah, but is it close enough?"
"Now it is I that you are confusing."
"Father, I've begun a project with a clear aim, out-shining all else. My methods are only beginning to – even I don't know what I mean to say."
"Then perhaps I can't help you at all. You began this so-called project with good intent."
"That's right." "And now you doubt that intent?"
"No – that's not it!"
"You doubt your judgement when choosing your methods. Ramifications."
"I don't know that word."
"Resonances. Echoes. Consequences."
"Consequences. I feel like I'm playing a game, that winning is all-important. I'm doubting that."
"Child, some people work in mysterious ways..."

"That's all he told you?" I shifted uncomfortably, leaning heavily on one leg. The priest's information was little, almost non-existent.
"Yes." He coughed. "You said you would leave?"
"Of course." I turned with some instability, and began to pick my way out of the church, leg after leg with precision. I left the priest to his decay and rubble, removing the unusual element from his routine. He would never see me again, I knew, and he was glad of that. In turn, I was glad to leave him, as shadowed and dusty as his church, decaying in a less visible way.
May God have mercy on his soul.

I left the dark behind; marching away from it with my head held high, nose in the air. My eyes, staring down stern at the street before me: I wished them glassy, and glassy they were.
The light was dead, that glow sick. Where to go next? Further out into the sweet countryside?
I'm a spider. I wanted my prey, but I knew not where to find him. The Doctor's out there, I thought, or down there under me. He's hiding, a dirty criminal hiding in abandoned doorways. He's scared – no, not scared of me. Scared of himself. The Doctor's somewhere in Vienna, I thought, and he wants to be caught. The Doctor wants to be dead.
God, I needed a coffee.

The points of snow dropped in disorientating messes. The wet roof-slates gleamed white. The Black Cat Café stood, squatly, between a thin library and a ladies hairdressers. In the hairdressers, they'd turned the lights on and saw down in through a steamy window and they looked out at me. Their faces were distorted by water, dribbles of melted snow. I smiled, a very full smile that had been stuck in my face like a thorn since I left the church.
They'd taken in the chairs from outside the Black Cat. Two tables still stood, covered in tarpaulins. The room inside was rather full, but I called for a cup of black filter-coffee and tugged myself tight against the edge of a nearby table. I got out a pack of cigarettes.
"I'd rather be alone, actually," said a man from across the table.
"Don't anger a Spiderweiss," I said; I looked up only briefly. A ghoulishly ashen face frozen in particularly human petulance.
"You needn't think you can intimidate me," he said. "I've nothing to hide."

"Get a life," I said. A cup of hot coffee, black as the pupil of an eye, was placed in front of me. I brought it to my lips, let it burn its way over my lower lip and between my teeth.

"Could you move, please?" he said. "I can ask the management. I've a friend here."

"What's your problem? Can't a policewoman have a cup of coffee without scaring you?" I smiled at his silence. It was his mouth that spoiled his face, sharp and snappy. He had fatherly eyes. He was clean. There was even a softness to him. A big blue woollen overcoat squashed around a wool jumper and a fat-cotton shirt made the idiot look round. He had a cap in his hands.

"I know the man I'm going to catch, and it's not you," I said reassuringly, pouring more coffee into my mouth, gulping it down. "Are you often in trouble with the law, is that it?"

"Nonsense," he said, "I wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Oh, victimless crimes."

"You don't scare me, not at all. I've nothing to feel ashamed of. Never stole a thing, never even thought to. Never been in a fight. Never touched a girl who didn't want it."

"I refuse to believe you," I told him, with a laugh.

"You refuse, do you?"

"You're quaking in your boots," I said, "you're whiter than a sheet. You've got some secret somewhere."

"Nonsense," he said again.

"Why the worry then? Why do you want me gone?" I put my mug in its saucer. My legs leaned me across the table at him.

"You'd really like to know?" he said.

I smiled a thin smile and raised an eyebrow.

"It's because you look like you were born Spiderweiss," he said, "like you came out of the womb a metal-foot creature with an iron brow. You scuttle about town as if you enjoy it, as if you were higher than us and get a kick out of that."

"I see." No smiles now.

"Your face, Fraulein, if you only saw it – you'd condemn your reflection at a glance, you know that? Your look makes every man a criminal."

My gaze floated over the other café-occupants, giggling and chatting to each other. So rosy and susceptible to a blade's point. "I'm out to catch a killer."

"His victims must so disappoint you. No staying power, eh?"

"And you really think that's how we think? What do you do?"

"I sell balloons. Is it a crime? There's motive and opportunity enough."

"Why don't you go outside and sell some more?"

He raised his cup and gulped down the tea. "If I'm not a suspect, Lt. Adeli?" He left, carrying a black-leather doctor's bag, which I imagined full of coloured rubber misshapes. The door behind him banged, and a bell burst its sound over us all.

Irritably I fought to roll the paper of a cigarette, but it kept going square-sided. I let it flip open inside my fingers and suddenly, across the table, glimpsed a small red book. "Diary", it read, with a handmade paper label: "Cosette Wilberforce."

More stunned by this than the balloon seller's words – the *Doctor's* words - I reached across the table and took the book. It fell open in my hands to a certain page, marked with a little piece of blue ribbon. Someone had written a message on the ribbon: "Smile More, Inspector". A taunt? Advice? I wasn't sure. But it couldn't make me smile again.

Already my mind was racing. Why had he come back? What did he want me to know? Where was this all going to?

Perhaps, I told myself, I should simply read the diary entry.

Out of the shadows come two figures, klitter-klatter on the thin metal floor. One is of medium height, blond, with an eager expression. The other is bathed in darkness, a tall presence like a human crow.

The dark man holds an object up above his head, watches the flickering numbers, and sighs. "As I thought," he whispers, replacing the instrument inside his coat. "Familiar design; the angular doorways caught my attention."

"It's very depressing."

"Mmm? Yes." The Doctor is gazing at the tall metal beams and rickety structure, spotted with wounds of orange-brown rust. Decay has set in, changing these standard-issue corridors into the stuff of nightmares, all shadows and cobwebs and unpleasant noises. "It's a machine...well, not a machine, not precisely, but a self-motivating port-of-call."

"A robot?" Cosette shivers involuntarily, even with the Doctor's muffler wrapped about her neck.

"A miniature spaceport on autorun. An abandoned petrol station, if you will, with a brain." He searches through his pockets again and comes up with a miniature torch. He gives it a shake and it flares on, revealing the long passage ahead. "Are you coming?"

There are many passages beyond that, leading from one direction to another, twisting and turning in a nearly endless knot. The Doctor never tires, but Cosette starts to feel the strain. He urges her on, through reinforcement or threats to leave her behind, and eventually they come to the heart of the structure.

It's an immense room, circular and multi-levelled, with electronica grouped in shimmering patches along the walls. Wiring and cords fill the upper strata like a game of cat's cradle; tug the right strand and it all falls down. A small lake of water is collected on the floor from leaky hydraulics systems, swishing about the travellers' shoes and turning the Doctor's eyes a brilliant green from the reflection - a brighter green than the water. "The maze in the heart of the castle ends here," he announces. "Everybody off, or continue the ride to Oxford Street."

"What is it?" asks Cosette. "Is it...a computer? Do they get bigger as time goes on, filling rooms and buildings with electronic circuitry?"

"Yes, and no," replies the Doctor, typically. "It's a certain sort of computer, very powerful and very specialised. But a trap might be a better description."

"A boring sort of trap."

"Better than playing American baseball." He turns and gives her a slow, deliberate wink, as if to say: everything is all right, I'm in control; I've got it all sorted out.

Then the clicking begins. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, melding and blending like the shrieks of the wind. Lights pulse across the walls, in patterns and colours, to the time of the sound. As they watch, the Doctor and Cosette are bathed in a fierce green light, pouring down from the metal sky above.

The Doctor calls over the noise, clutching Cosette to his side protectively. "Don't be afraid."

Suddenly, it stopped. The lights went dead. Cosette remembered to breathe.

"Doctor," she asked quietly, "has it finished?"

It begins to speak.

It speaks and Cosette can hear the piercing sounds form primitive phrases, the kind a cat might make if it had just been endowed with a human palette. They aren't English, or any other language Cosette can understand, but she knows in her own way that they are words all the same.

The Doctor cocks his head, nods, blinked twice. He walks to the centre of the room and stares up at the cat's cradle over his head. The wires and connexions glimmer there in the light. "Mmm," he mutters quietly. "We *are* in trouble, aren't we?"

"What is it?" asks Cosette quietly. She goes to the Doctor's side, listening all the while to the sounds roll into waves around them.

"Cosette, I am forced to admit an indiscretion."

"Doctor?"

"I came here for a reason."

"Ah."

The Doctor strokes his chin, considering. "Before I met you, long before I even saw through these eyes, I knew of a time when disease would consume your planet. It struck quickly and with care, travelling from person to person to person, a deadly contagion spread over the major cities of Europe. I could do nothing to stop it.

"Over time," he continues, "I began to investigate its source."

"And...?" she prompts.

He makes an encompassing gesture. "Here. Programmed and sent to reap the Earth."

"But why?"

He gives her a sidelong glance. "Watch closely." He spreads out his arms as if appealing to a mighty god. "Subject: Enemy. Member of the race of Gallifreyan Time Lords. Often found residing upon planet

Earth."

More speaking; whisper-words lacking any soul. They seep into Cosette's brain, burrowing deep and unsettling her.

"Name: Doctor."

Lights flare on, a thousand tiny cameras flashing together. In the alcoves above, Cosette can see row upon row of dead figures, rusting and cracked. These were the invaders of Earth, the monsters in iron who had been seemingly invincible. Their eye-sticks are broken or busted, their domes dented.

"Small problem, you see," says the Doctor. "Their little virus doesn't discriminate. It killed them just as easily as you or I or any human being." He considers. "I do believe they were trained to attack me, should I ever arrive. Pity; seems a waste."

"So what's the trouble?"

"Hmm?"

"The virus."

"Ah!" The Doctor returns to the problem at hand. "It's run rampant, or will do. Its masters have died; there's nothing to control it."

"How do *we* stop it?"

The Doctor looks at her slowly, and takes a deep breath. "I had hoped to stop them before this point."

"Can't we just go back in time?"

He shakes his head, and pulls out a pocket-watch from inside his coat. The lid snaps open to reveal a mess of dates in alien languages. "No time. The Invasion of Earth ended yesterday; everybody on Earth is enjoying a brand new day." His features soften for a moment. "Some, a brand new life." He returns to the present abruptly. "I may be able to develop an immunisation, and introduce it into the Earth cultures."

"But hasn't this disease started its course already?"

"No...no. This station is only a time bomb, an accident waiting to happen. The virus won't find a carrier for...ah...twenty years or more, as the crow flies. Someone will come on-board, be infiltrated; take the virus back home. If it doesn't go to Earth automatically, it will do soon enough." He turns on his heel and marches out of the room, back in the direction of the TARDIS. "Come on, Cosette."

I sighed, and tucked the diary into my inside pocket. I understood now: the Doctor was, perhaps, not so evil as he seemed - but still, his means and his actions made little sense. Did he not realise that his immunisation was a killer?

"Bonjour," said a voice. I looked up to see a girl of twenty, petite and blonde, with intelligent eyes and a somewhat uncomfortable smile. She was wearing a modest grey suit, far out of fashion, but attractive on her body. She looked somehow afraid, in a way, but I could tell that she was merely out of her element, like a tourist.

"Good evening," I said in English. I gestured at the chair opposite me. "Please, sit."

"Are you...Fraulein Speiter?" She said it as if it was a real name, as if many people had told her I was born with it.

"I am. Is your name Cosette?"

The girl seemed both surprised and pleased at that. She took the chair, and leaned across the table towards me. "Fraulein Speiter, I offer you my complete and total support. What the Doctor is doing is immoral; sacrificing lives to save more lives is playing God. However you stop him...by whatever means...I will help."

I let the silence hang for a moment. "Did he send you?"

"What! No."

"Then I hope you recognise the danger you put yourself in."

"I do, Fraulein, I do. I've come looking for you – I need your help."

I was curious. If the girl knew something about the Doctor's location, it might give me a fresh line of investigation. "Have you seen the Doctor?"

"No...but I know where he is."

"Really." I was sceptical.

The next words bore heavily down upon my brain. "He's returned to the sewers."

It didn't take us any longer than it should have to get where we were going; Cosette's memory was sharp. The snow came down on us as we wove through the darkening folds of the city, fresh and sweet as a dying man's last breath. I wasn't wanted, that much was obvious... Despite her geniality, I was just tough-for-hire. When I spoke, she didn't answer. A bloody monster, I thought. A monster in a story of hers. But I pitter-pattered as slow as she did, and the stars dropped with the snow.

We came to a barren ground, broad and grey, with an open entry to the sewers, starfish-like, in the centre of the road. It had been recently used, left unattended. I climbed down as quickly as I could, carrying Cosette, and we began our journey.

She had a device that told her where this machine was – this machine I'd seen referenced in her diary. The device also told her that someone was inside it, someone with a key, and only the Doctor could be that person. With her instructions I sloshed carefully through the muck, guiding us slowly to our destination with a miniature torch.

After a time we came a dark alley of the underground, filthy and stinking like the rest, but with a peculiar and intimidating sound. Aural presence, a pervasive *hum*, surrounded our bodies and seeped into our ears.

"There it is," whispered Cosette. "The TARDIS." It was huge, blocky and blue, like a kiosk. "It can travel anywhere in Time or Space."

I felt a pricking on the back of my neck. I fought the memories of old legends, old tales that told of gods that could travel anywhere in special carriages, of inanimate creatures brought to life, of demons and devils sitting, disguised, outside your very home...

"Of course you've a devil on your doorstep. It's been there all this time. Tell me, if you catch it, can you contain it?" I swung my torch to cover the voice. The wall seemed to keel outwards to reveal a tall, thin man, bathed in the heavy folds of a long, dark winter coat. He had a somewhat bird-like face, sharp without being sharp, and his eyes were closed. He wore a long muffler and an almost-new black fedora.

"Tell me," he repeated, "what you'll do when you've got it?"

I stared at him in shock. *This* was the mysterious Doctor?

The tall man opened his eyes abruptly. They were cold and piercing, a murky clear colour to match his clothes. "*I* can tell *you* what you'll do, if you like."

"Please do."

"You'll kill yourselves, and afterwards, the rest of human civilisation." He jerked his head to face me. "Would you like that?"

"I don't think your capture will weigh heavily on my conscious, Herr Doctor."

"No." The man's voice was languid and sleepy, almost mocking. "I shouldn't think it would." He smiled thinly. "But I'm not speaking of my capture."

I crept forward. "Who are you? Who are you truly?"

"A friend." The thin smile continued to play the man's lips.

"I'm afraid I'll will need more than that, Herr Doctor. So will the Beaufrragter, when I bring you in."

"Not a Brigadier General? Pity."

"Doctor..."

"Have you ever heard of the man without a government?' The tall man detached himself from the wall and moved to sit, hunched over, against the wall. "The unpaid adviser?"

"That isn't giving me much to go on."

"*Leutnant* Johanna Adeli, on the edge of a promotion. Born 2149, just outside Vienna, to a military family. Your father was with the army and, later, UNISYC, second-in-command with the Austrian division. Made it to the rank of Major before being killed in a skirmish with some rather angry Invaders, and was buried with honours. You plan to survive beyond Major, if only to spite him, so you try not to associate with UNISYC. Your favourite food is hot buttered toast, you used to sing, and your girlfriend – yes, that's *right* – hasn't the slightest idea how to satisfy your needs in that metallic contraption.

"You see, I know all about you, Johanna. Why don't you know all about me?"

I wished then that I could pounce on him, like a spider; the barman's warnings of a *nosferatu* frightened me. This man might not eat blood from his victims, but he absorbed people's lives, and that is a dangerous trait.

"I've brought you here, Inspector, very deliberately. I need your help." The Doctor took out a long, thin phial from inside his coat; it was filled with a murky green substance that shimmered in the darkness.

"Kill him," said Cosette from my side, sounding unsure. "Don't let him get into your head!"

"I'll listen," I told her, "for as long as I think necessary. Go on, Doctor. Tell me why."

"Because," said the Doctor, "it's the exact virus I've tried so hard to fight."

The implication of his words struck home to me, opened up the full horror of the situation. If this was true... but no.

"You're lying," I told him bluntly. "I have no reason to believe you."

His eyes seemed disappointed; they took on a pale blue colour, a reminiscence of the paint on his machine. "No, Inspector, you haven't any. You have to make a choice in trust, so listen carefully: kill me now, and you may destroy the source of your plague, this heathen of a man who seeks to eliminate Vienna, or all of Europe, perhaps. Or let me go, and run the risk that I am only an unwitting accomplice, someone whose good intentions were slandered by another. Let me go and let me stop the man behind this all."

In a moment my mind ran over a hundred possibilities, a hundred different futures. "You're asking me to believe someone changed your formula, made the antidote to the antidote?"

"You're very precise."

"Who? Theodor?"

He laughed sharply, a single biting "Ha!".

"Not Theodor. He's not that clever, despite how he appears."

The Doctor turned towards his machine, took a silver key from under his muffler. "Come along, Cosette."

"Another of your delivery boys?" I was still trying to think who it might be.

"No." This was Cosette.

The Doctor looked back at her, focused his changing eyes on her face. "Cosette," he said, and it came out hoarsely. He was fighting emotion, I could tell. "Come with me. I'll take care of this thing; I'll make it right; I always do. Then we'll go somewhere else, on a holiday...Praxis, perhaps, or the ancient palace of Egypt."

Cosette hesitated, unsure. Then she ran to him, smiling, trusting, and knowing that everything would be all right. She ran to him as a daughter to her father, or even a sister to an older brother, with a light in her eyes. She reached the TARDIS' door and closed her hand about its handle, gave a pull...

The Doctor was on her in a moment, pushed her to the ground with a splash, set his teeth as the tears poured down his face. He reached inside his coat and fumbled with a pocket watch, took the chain between his hands.

All at once, I knew what was happening, and why.

He was strangling her now, killing her with time, killing her with his own prized pocket watch. I could only stare as she gagged, struggled for air, and finally expired. She collapsed loosely in his arms, against the folds of his coat.

He shuddered as the tears poured down, harder and harder. He closed her eyes gently, lifted her body up and held it close to his chest. It seemed to be enveloped in the night, in his coat and his muffler and his arms, and it struck me then that he held her like a fallen child.

I managed to speak. "Cosette," I said slowly. "It was Cosette all the time."

"Yes," he whispered. "On the spaceport...in the diary...those voices. It wasn't spread by infection, Joanna, it was spread by subliminal influence. Information seeping into her mind, commands to spread the poison, directions to change my formula. It wasn't her fault." He took a deep breath, but his face remained red. "It wasn't her fault..."

"You used me. You used me as a way to gain her trust, to trick her. If there was someone against you, you could make your case to *her*, not to Cosette. If I truly believed you evil, it would be all the more convincing. She'd never know you were on to her."

"Something like that, Inspector," he nodded. "I led you along, appeared to you in guises, ensured that you would read the diary and meet Cosette. I'm...I'm sorry for it all. I'm sorry this had to be done." He swallowed painfully. "I'm sorry she'll never see Praxis." He jerked his head up, suddenly, to face me. "My granddaughter lives here in this time, in London. She'll have been here for ten years, she'll have a family and love and peace. I couldn't allow..." He broke off again.

"You don't need to explain to me," I told him. "There's no need for them anymore. Just tell me it'll end, tell me it won't spread."

"It won't," he assured me. "It needs a carrier...*I* was the carrier, the man who gives everyone the needles. And she was the formula."

"Good."

"Goodbye, Inspector," he said softly. Balancing the girl's body, he managed to unlock the door to his machine, and stepped inside. The door shut with a *clang!* and a moment later, a curious rhythmic wailing filled the tunnel. As I watched, the machine vanished, leaving only darkness beyond my torch.

I am older now, and I have seen many changes in my lifetime. The plague ended, just as the Doctor said it would, and Vienna Bureau has a record in its files that says the Doctor lies rotting in the sewers. I told him I found him there, quite dead, overdosed on his own drug. I refused a promotion for it, but I've made the ranks justly through other jobs, and I speak to you now on the verge of becoming a Beaufrragter myself. I don't know yet if I'll take the position; it means less to me now than it once did.

I think of the mysterious Doctor often – as I said, I see him often in my mind's eye. I've spoken to UNISYC on business, and curiously enough they have blank files on the man; several of them, in fact. From word of mouth, he seems to pop up when you least expect him, so I wonder...will I meet him again?

Sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice. *Was* Cosette behind it? I was never really offered proof. It could be that he lied to get away. How did Cosette find me? Chance? And what about Vaella? Sometimes I think of her death, and I wonder why. And who – the Doctor, or Cosette, or someone else?

All these questions and more haunt me still. Most of all, however, I wonder about that spaceport. If it still exists, hanging up there in the stars, with the mutilated corpses of the Invaders sitting in rows like tin soldiers. If it's still active. If, one day, a new carrier will arrive, and the plague will rise again.

If I take this promotion; if I become confined to a desk; who will be there to stop it?

The Doctor?

undiscovered

countries

Executive Action

by Lance Parkin

Wardog's fur looked bristly, but it was soft, like down. Golden fur covered every part of his body, apart, of course, from the bionic arm, the result of that incident twelve years ago. Rema-Du loved to lay her head on his chest; it was like a warm pillow. His face wasn't really canine at all, despite his name. It was more like a bear, or a raccoon, Rema had always thought.

Wardog's nose twitched. Rema smiled – dreaming of past conquests, no doubt.

-and he was leaping across the room towards the door.

Startled, all Rema-Du could think to do was pull the sheet up over her chest.

The first one who had come through was already dead, the life slammed out of him by the impact with the back wall.

Wardog took the other's gun and broke the hand that had been carrying it. The squeal of pain from its former owner was enough to focus Rema-Du's mind on the situation.

Both were wearing dark grey tunics. They were small men, Newborn.

'Two?' Wardog snarled. 'They only sent two of you to get me? How did you even know I was here?'

His attacker was looking at Rema as she stepped out of bed, embarrassed at the sight of her body, but fascinated at the same time. The Newborn were so squeamish about the body, and bodily functions. They barely even ate or slept, let alone loved or lusted. Rema frowned at the thought.

'The fact people, real people, have hanky panky doesn't even occur to them,' she told Wardog. 'The thought horrifies them, they close their eyes to it.'

'Then why come to your room looking for me?' Wardog asked, but he'd answered his own question before he finished asking it 'They came for you!' he growled.

Rema retrieved the gun. 'A banned weapon; one that can kill even a Time Lord. A real Time Lord.'

She towered over the Newborn, who was shaking, now. 'Don't kill me!'

Wardog smiled, showing a row of fangs. 'You people are very difficult to kill.'

'What do you mean, "you people"? You were born of the Loom. You are inheritors of the Legacy of Rassilon.'

'Daddy renounced us by the end,' Wardog said sardonically. 'He got his true Loom-born, and his prototypes and early experiments were cut out of his will. One of our kind, Fascination, has suggested we call ourselves the Bastards of Rassilon, but the name has failed to catch on.'

'You can stand with us,' the man told him. 'You're one of us.'

Wardog broke the man's neck.

'That's a no, by the way.' He looked over to Rema, who was feeling sick. 'He'll get better, and so will his friend,' Wardog assured her. 'But we need to get to a place of safety.' He held up a golden disc. 'This man was acting on behalf of the Council.'

'Why would the Supreme Council – '

'Wait! You're in danger!'

The young woman was thin, skeletal. Her eyes were surrounded by worry lines and dark rings of skin. She was panting, out of breath. This was another of the Special Executive, like Wardog. Parahumans, employed to do the Time Lord's dirty work.

'Two attackers in grey, with guns.'

'I know that now, Cobweb,' Wardog told the new arrival, sweeping his bionic arm round to show the two bodies. 'You're a precognitive, the whole point of seeing the future ought to be to give us some notice of little surprises like this.'

Once, Rema's parents had told her, all Gallifreyans could see the future as clear as the past. But that gift had been snatched from them when she was still a child. Cobweb had been an attempt to recapture the glories of old. Like all the parahumans, she had been engineered, imbued with time energies. It had left her more and less than human, given her powers to control some aspect of time. Cobweb was a powerful telepath, in constant psychic contact with her past and future selves.

It didn't always make her easy company.

'I tried to,' Cobweb said, her head twitching. 'I remembered the attack ten minutes ago, but your communicator wasn't on, and so I had to run and – step two feet to your left!'

Wardog did as he was told, and the wall two feet to his right exploded. He was already pointing the gun at his attacker.

A pulse of green light flew across the room, disintegrating the attacker.

'A weapon that works just as well on the Newborn,' Wardog grunted.

'Another man in a grey tunic,' Rema murmured.

'Not any more,' Cobweb added.

Wardog was back in her room, pulling on his clothes. 'Hardly the time to worry about their fashion sense,' he called back.

'She's thinking that they are not members of the Watch,' Cobweb cackled. 'And that there is no wonder you are such a vigorous lover with such finely-defined muscles.'

Rema shot her a glance, and didn't need to tell her to get out of her mind.

Wardog was already dressed, and was strapping on his wrist communicator. 'That's a very good point. Wouldn't the Watch usually so this sort of thing? A couple of them might have had a chance. And if the Council didn't know of our ... relationship, my lady, then why not send the Special Executive to do their dirty work? That is, after all, what we are for.'

'That man sounded like a fanatic,' Rema told them. 'One of those who advocates rights for Newborns.'

The two attackers, the two that had left corpses, were beginning to change, their features glowing, reforming. It was still a rare enough occurrence to have some novelty value.

'Can you read them?' Rema asked.

Cobweb shook her head. 'They'll take a few hours to settle down. At the moment, all is confusion.'

Wardog nodded. 'You've got that right.'

He flicked his communicator on, and immediately Zeitgeist's face appeared on the small screen.

'What's going on over there?' he asked. His accent ... Rema shook her head, tried to remember ... already she couldn't remember what his voice sounded like. A side effect, she supposed, of the fact that he didn't really exist in any definable way.

'You tell me,' Wardog answered cheerfully.

'The Citadel is on fire. They're rounding people up. They seem to have started with the senior Time Lords and their family.'

Rema stopped in her tracks. 'The war has reached us? This is the Black Sun?' That had become inevitable after the death of Adamath, her last lover; an ambassador for the Black Sun. That future was set in place, everyone agreed that much.

'No, these are Time Lords rounding up Time Lords, no doubt about it.' Wardog threw a glance back at the two attackers, their bodies renewing themselves. 'Although ... Zeitgeist, you say Time Lords. Which Time Lords are being rounded up and which ones are doing the rounding up?'

Cobweb gasped. 'The Newborn are moving against the Womb-Born. The old order is giving way.'

Wardog looked as surprised as Rema was.

'They wouldn't dare ... ' she whispered.

'It's a bold move,' Wardog replied, 'Unexpected.'

'But the Loom-born are just ... they are just ... '

'Slaves? Receptacles for genetic material?'

'Pale imitations,' Rema said finally.

'But they outnumber the Womb-Born now,' he reminded her gently. 'They are the survivors.'

'Because we made them to be,' Rema objected. 'They aren't even immortal, they need to replace their bodies when they wear out, even those had to be re-engineered to survive as long as they do.'

'They are the future,' Cobweb muttered.

'A competitor species,' Rema said. 'One in the same environmental niche. The Loom compete for the same resources as the Womb-born. The annihilation of one or the other is inevitable.'

'So it's kill or be killed?' Wardog asked sadly. 'My lady, I know which of those I prefer, but I fear that staying here will mean we settle for second choice. Zeitgeist, round up the others, we need to get off-planet.'

'Leave Gallifrey?' Rema echoed, shocked. 'Never! This is my world!'

'Was, Rema. May be again, but not tonight.'

They hurried off into the darkness.

Out of the Shadows

by Dave Whittam

I'm going to start by telling you a little about myself. Not too much - just enough so you know where I'm coming from. My name is unimportant. I've had so many yet not one of them describes who I am. None comes even close. I am 31 years old. I am male. I have short brown hair and hazel eyes. I am of average height and of average build. I wear average clothes. You would not look twice at me in the street - I am average looking. That's the point.

I am a Shadow Directory Agent.

You haven't heard of the Shadow Directory? Well you wouldn't. We like to keep a low profile you see. It's not out of a sense of paranoia though - just we don't feel that people need to know about us. Or at least that's the way I feel.

Why am I writing this then? Good question. It's because I'm about to quit.

I should explain that nobody quits the Shadow Directory. Ever. Well, no-one has quit the Shadow Directory before anyway. Not that I know about anyway. I wonder if I'll be a trendsetter.

I've never met another Shadow Directory Agent. We work alone. Or at least I think we do. Having never met another Agent - at least knowing at the time they were an Agent - I don't actually know. I'm TOLD we work alone - but that could be a lie. In fact, everything I've been told and shown could be a lie.

I joined the Agency ten years ago - I was only 21. Handpicked or so I was told. But they would tell me that wouldn't they?

I'd better start at the beginning or this could get confusing. Oh, and don't expect stunning prose and vivid description - that really isn't my style, the purpose of the language I'll be using will be to get the story told as quickly and concisely as possible. You'll feel less uncomfortable that way.

No one ever told me it would be easy to be a soldier. I wish they had - because it is.

I don't think I'd have bothered if they'd just given me one little hint about how simple a British soldiers life was. All I had to do was follow orders. Very little free will - and to tell you the truth I was bored.

I'd signed up when I was sixteen, a few weeks after my birthday. Full of optimism, I signed on the dotted line under the watchful eye of a square-jawed officer. He looked like a reject from an old Flash Gordon movie. I was going to be the best. Of the best, naturally.

And I was. All the top honours, all the awards, all the accolades. I was told repeatedly that I was 'going places'. But I tended to stay in this country. Promotion was elusive, hiding in the shadows. Every time I thought that my time was there it seems I was kept down on some minor detail. I think they wanted to keep me as a good little front liner, someone to push over the top when times got tough. Me? I just wanted to travel the world; a luxury the Shadow Directory would later afford me. I'm getting ahead of myself again, aren't I?

Ironically it was on my first trip overseas that I decided maybe the army was no longer for me. I was sent to Ireland. Admittedly, this wasn't far overseas but it was the first chance I got to get away from England. Something you also have to remember though is that this was the Seventies. Ireland was not a nice place for a soldier to be at that time. I remember leaving the port at Larne, the stench of the docks overpowering. We had arrived at three in the morning. Sitting in darkness on the coach until we got to our barracks. The looks of relief on the faces of the people leaving as we arrived. I began to wonder what I'd got myself into.

I was nineteen now. Three years of the same old shit, day in, day out. I wanted out but was too scared to try and get out. Well, until the proverbial straw came along.

It was during a routine patrol that went nasty. A couple of snipers started taking pot-shots at us. Contrary to the media reports this was not an every day occurrence. We all took cover, trying to ascertain where the shots were coming from. After we'd pinpointed where they were, our Sergeant ordered us to take them out. So I slit his throat.

I know what you're thinking - I was appalled by the disregard for the rules that my Sergeant had shown - or even his contempt for human life. Well, you're wrong. I killed him because he was being stupid, because we would be the ones who would take the blame. The ones who would suffer. It's always the troops who get the court martial, rather than the commanding officers. If we had taken out the snipers we would have been up on a charge. So I thought that I might as well be in trouble for something worthwhile. Like ridding the British army of another dumb Sergeant.

I crawled from beneath the truck I was under, trying to avoid the growing stain of unctuous fluid. Ochre in the street lamps. I got out of the range of the snipers, ducking down back streets away from my former colleagues. I could hear them shouting as they worked out what had happened. I came across a drunken reveller lying in a gutter, trying his best to get rid of his stomach lining. I put him out of his misery by snapping his neck in one fluid motion. You didn't even hear the crack. The army trains you to be an emotionless killer. Well, they try their best anyway. I stole his clothes and struggled into them, tightening the belt to keep the trousers up. I set fire to my uniform in a dustbin down a side alley. I left Ireland that night on the first ferry to the mainland.

I lived for nearly two years as a hitman. It's not as glamorous as it sounds. Holed up in a B&B in Rhyl for two months until the army stopped looking for me. I took jobs after that from anyone and everyone. Bumping off a fishmonger's wife for a couple of hundred. Twenty thousand for taking out a fairly senior foreign politician. MI5 even offered to give me a pardon if I did some work for them. I didn't need their pardon and, as they weren't offering me any money, I declined gracelessly.

I faded into the shadows, which is why I guess they found me.

I'd moved on from Rhyl and was living in Cambridge. Cambridge is a good place for anonymity - lots of tiny streets and faceless people. More shadows.

It's also beautiful, although after Rhyl I could have moved to Birmingham and it would have been a step up in the world.

I was still a hired gun. Or a hired knife. Whatever. I had enough money to pick and choose my jobs a little more carefully now. I had made a name for myself after the aforementioned politician and my work was sought out rather than me having to look for it.

It was at this point that the Shadow Directory made contact.

I was walking down towards the town centre when a shape blurred past me, knocking my shoulder as it did so. I span around in a half circle and was just about to turn and shout after the disappearing figure when I was knocked out of the way again. This time I fell to the floor, grazing my hands and ripping my trousers at the knee.

The sudden pain of a scraped knee made me see red - which is admittedly a bit of a hazard in my occupation. I checked to see no-one was watching, mentally packing my bags to leave Cambridge as I did so.

I took out my gun and carefully aimed at the departing figure. I shot the back of his knee out.

The figure fell to the floor and I walked quietly towards him. As I got closer I could see that something wasn't quite right. There didn't seem to be any blood.

The man was lying on the floor, moaning quietly but there was nothing in his leg, just an empty black hole. I could feel the bile rising in my throat as I put my gun to his head and pulled the trigger. His head collapsed like a popped balloon. Nothing inside there either.

I heard a cough at my shoulder - it was the man that this thing had been chasing.

He slipped me a card and walked away silently.

Shadow Directory UK Branch
Fourth Floor
Castle House
London

I fingered the card as I looked up at the imposing building in front of me. The windows were dark. I could make out vague shadows inside, moving slowly in the offices.

I pressed the buzzer next to the small card, which read 'SDUK' in appalling handwriting.

"Who is it?" A voice whispered from the tiny speaker.

I told them my name.

"Go home," a dark sotto voce. "You've already been accepted."

The intercom clicked off in a hiss of static.

I pressed the switch again. It left an imprint on my thumb.

"Who is it?" The voice whispered again.

I repeated my name and, before I could be told to go home again, I quickly asked what the Shadow Directory was and why I would want to join. Just not quite as politely as that. In fact, my actual words were. "Look, what the fuck is the Shadow Directory and why the fuck should I want to be a part of it. All this secrecy bullshit is pissing me off."

There was a sharp intake of breath from the other side.

"Go home," the voice said, "all the information you need is there."

So I went home.

I pushed the door to my little two-bed terrace slowly open. My gun was already drawn - just in case, you understand - and I padded down the hall.

Nothing looked like it had been disturbed, which is a good sign that someone had been in my house, everything looked like it had been placed far too carefully back where it had been.

I found the package in the bedroom. I call it a bedroom, in reality it's just a room with a mattress on the floor.

It was a plain cardboard box, crudely sealed across the top with cheap brown packing tape.

I picked it up carefully and dropped it out of the window.

It landed with a thud - not a bomb then.

You may laugh at this, thinking that I'd probably have blown my own house up if it had been a bomb but I had every reason to suspect it wasn't. First, it wasn't that heavy and second it didn't *feel* like a bomb - another of those hunches I tend to rely on quite a bit. So that's why I dropped it out of the window - just to make sure, you understand.

I retrieved the parcel and sat at the dining room table. I used my knife to saw off the packing tape and pulled out the sheaf of papers inside. I read in disbelief.

"You are now a member of the Shadow Directory. You may not think you are yet - but we've chosen you - so get used to it. The Shadow Directory is a centuries old, world-wide organisation. We aren't run by any government - we aren't funded by any entrepreneur. We have all the money we need and aren't answerable to anyone. We are here to protect the Earth. (I laughed out loud at this point it sounded so melodramatic)

Yes, that's right. We are here to protect the Earth.

Enclosed in your starter pack are known threats to the planet. These include both local and foreign threats. By foreign, of course we mean 'alien', 'UFOs', 'greys', 'BEMs', 'monsters', 'goblins' etc. etc. We know you won't believe this yet. But you will. You will.
Also enclosed in your parcel are:
A new set of passports
A handgun (be careful - it is pretty self-explanatory - but you won't have seen anything like it before)

and A communications device for receiving orders
Your new bank account details are also enclosed along with half a million in cash - and there is no limit on your new credit card. Don't worry about repaying it.

Be aware that we can call on you any time – to do anything and to go anywhere."

One year later, shooting an intelligent Ogron as it tried to pass itself off as an Arab businessman.

Two years later, destroying a Watchmaker Thought Crystal.

Three years later, gassing a tribe of Masnark dwarves as they set up a colony under a Mongolian desert.

Four years later, I was chasing an Ossarian quadruped through the Amazon Basin.

Five years later, bringing down a Jitarri Warspear over Wimbledon Common. Nice mess for the wombles.

Six years later... well you get the picture.

So that's it really. It brings me up to date. I've always done what they've told me - always completed their jobs. I had become one of the most respected chirurgeons in the world. But it all changed last night. Last night I stopped chasing and started listening.

I was face to face with the most dangerous alien. Or so I'd been told. I'd tracked him down to a small cluster of villages, which went under the collective name of Saddleworth, just outside Manchester. It was atop the infamous Saddleworth Moors that I found him. He was sitting cross-legged on a small hillock of white heather.

He was in the form of a little man, with a shock of red hair, a pair of striped braces and trousers a size too small. I almost wanted to laugh. This was the guy they wanted dead? I started to draw my gun and the little guy just cocked his head - a slightly sad smile on his face.

I'd expected him to run - like they all do when I get the gun out. He didn't. He just looked at me with a slight look of pity.

I walked over and placed the end of the barrel between his eyes.

He smiled at me and must have seen the slightly puzzled look that washed over my face. I quickly fought it and set my face in a hard mask. His grin was even wider now.

"Just listen to me," he whispered, "that's all I ask." He asked me to go with him. He talked about another Universe out there; a world of magic and mischief; a world like our own, but with its own rules. None of the petty bureaucracy of this Earth. He said that I could make a difference there.

And I figured, why not? What have I got to lose? No friends, no family. No loyalties. Nothing. I always wanted to travel.

You may think it's odd that I'm actually going to quit the Directory. Actually go and hand in my notice rather than just leave. I'm a professional you see and being a professional means having obligations. I know they'll try and stop me. Maybe even try and kill me. I wonder what the procedure is for an agent who's gone rogue?

So that's why as soon as I've handed in my notice I'm getting in his big blue box.

I'm going to step into the light.

ALAN
BEDNAR

Bell, Book and Candle

by Julian Eales

'Put down the athame, take off the goat's head and put your trousers on. You're nicked!' Inspector Jack Addison raised his Malleus warrant card to identify his authority to the assembled coven before him. Cultists immediately scattered to the four corners of the room, searching for an exit, only to find uniformed officers blocking them both. The goat-headed warlock stood defiantly, his ceremonial knife glinting under the fluorescent light of the office. The sacrificial altar doubled as an antique desk between the hours of nine and five, but the inkwell was an efficient channel for blood offerings outside office hours.

Addison advanced upon him, slowly, but assuredly; he watched the warlock's arm twitch, but remain upraised, as if he could not make up his mind whether to finish the act or follow Addison's directive. Before he could make a decision, Addison was in his face. The warlock's indecision ended, and he swung his arm down like a pendulum, bringing the blade across the police officer. Luckily for Addison, his reflexes were quick enough to block the blow before the ceremonial athame could touch his skin, redirecting it into a different leg, that of the desk. Throughout, the sacrificial victim lay naked and unresisting upon the table-top. Obviously under the influence of some narcotic, Addison surmised.

Stefan Ryskowicz, Rysk to those of his colleagues he entrusted his name to, wrenched the warlock's headdress off, dumping the flea-bitten goat head to the floor. Flushed and sweaty from his exertions and his choice of titfer, Chairman of the council, Neil Varga had seen better days. Addison ushered in another of the uniformed officers to handcuff him and take him away, with the rest of his cronies.

'Bloody local authorities… You give them a sniff of power and they think they own the world,' Addison snorted derisively. He removed his crumpled trenchcoat, and covered the intended victim's modesty. It would be best if she awoke with at least a semblance of dignity about her. He directed a WPC to see to her welfare, and to find her clothing among one of the piles of abandoned cultists business attire piled at the side of the office.

The image lost focus, until only the prone woman on the altar desk remained visible. Though her body lay unmoving and drugged, her astral form sat up, translucent, with a blue radiance, and turned to look up, an accusation on her breath.

'So, why am I still dead?'

Natalie Gordons sat bolt upright in bed, for the third night in succession. It was her *gift*, they said. It was the reason why she had been transferred from a promising career path in the Met to the band of freaks they called the Witchhammers. The Malleus Pre-Crime Unit. When her precognitive dreams manifested, she tried to hide it, but her sleep pattern was interrupted, and her work began to suffer. At her six-monthly review, they had been disappointed with her performance, and in a defensive moment, it just came out. They could not file the paperwork fast enough. Although the work of the Malleus had made police clean-up rates close to perfect, the truth was that the uniforms were uncomfortable around them. It was an uneasy alliance, and there were rumours about them being funded by the Vatican. Gordons knew nothing of such things. To the others, she was still the new kid on the block. 'Giantkiller' Jack Addison was not particularly known for his communication skills. All she knew was that everyone in the Malleus had secrets to hide, and none more so than the one who called himself The Doctor. Not strictly on the payroll as such, he was more of an advisor, and the only man who Addison would ever defer to, regardless of how high up the food chain they were. He came and went as he pleased, and never a word of explanation. To give him his due, when the cards were down, he always seemed to have an Ace up his sleeve. Perhaps he could explain these recurring dreams Gordons was having? She glanced over at the clock to see whether it was worth attempting to roll over and go back to sleep, or if she was going to be late for work once again.

'3.31 am. Great!' Plumping her pillows, Gordons prepared to sink back into slumber for a hopefully

uneventful few hours…

'*Why am I still dead?*' The ghost had been waiting for her. Bastard! Natalie had seen ghosts before, usually during daylight hours, but that was with the aid of a spirit harness. This was something else again. It was unnerving to see her like this. She tried not to stare too hard in one place, because when she did, she would start to see inside the body, through to intangible innards, ectoplasmic blood pumping through etheric veins. She had to fight the urge to touch the spectre, to see if her hand would pass through the dreamstuff, and what it might *feel* like.

'Don't ask me! I said that I'd report it, and I did. Inspector Addison said that he'd warned your boss off. He rang him at work and "scared seven shades of shit out of him", he said.' Gordons was exasperated. This may be a dream, but she knew that; it was lucid; she ought to be able to influence events, like she had been taught. 'You shouldn't be able to haunt me like this! You're not even dead yet! Aren't there rules about this sort of thing?'

'I don't know anything…' the ghost's anger fell away, 'All I know is that one minute I'm having a drink in a horrid little bar with my boss, so he won't sack me, and the next, I'm floating by the ceiling watching him… watching him *kill* me…' At the end, her voice trailed off into sobbing, sounding extremely disconcerting, as the afterlife drained all emotion out of the voice. Without thinking, Natalie went to embrace her, to console her a little. As they came into contact, the delicate spirit form burst apart, as if a strong wind had scattered it, and Gordons started awake, to find her cheeks wet and clutching herself tightly.

'I don't need an appointment. This is police business, darling!' Addison breezed past the temporary secretary, his entourage in tow, bulleting towards Councillor Varga's office. Her protestations could be heard inside, giving Varga a moment of preparation to collect his thoughts before Addison confronted him. He gestured briefly, activating a minor cantrip to calm himself, and adjusted his posture behind his desk. He was momentarily annoyed at the inefficiency of his new secretary. Mary would never have allowed him to be disturbed so easily. It was true what they said: you just could not get the staff, these days.

Addison was accompanied by Rysk, Gordons and Malleus photographer, Russell Nash. Gordons had insisted upon coming, given her personal stake in the case, despite the fact that she looked like she needed a couple of days sleep. Addison had a hunch that Nash's special talent would be of use, and he knew all too well to trust that instinct. Pushing ahead of her superior, Gordons poked an accusatory finger at the councillor, and opened her mouth to say something devastating, but the effect was lost by an uncontrollable urge to yawn.

Addison found his voice first. 'Neil Varga. I am placing you under arrest under the Murderous Intent Act of 1973. You do not have to say anything, but…'

'Don't be absurd, officer. I've done nothing wrong.' His manner was pure-bred politico. It oozed; a slick that seabirds could get stuck in. This did not endear him to Addison, and the magical calmness he had enchanted himself with did little to help.

Gordons piped up 'You were warned, scumbag!' Nash put a pudgy hand on her shoulder to hold her back, but she shrugged it off. While she held the councillor's attention, Rysk took the opportunity to go for a little exploration, guided by the voices in his head.

Varga looked perplexed. 'Warned? Warned about what? Young lady, I have no idea what you're talking about… Really, Chief Inspector?'

'Inspector.' Addison spat back at him, understanding the intent of the comment. In the Malleus, there was little hope of promotion. If you were transferred to the Witchhammers, it was where they sent your career to die. As the chairman of the council, Varga was fully aware of that.

'*Inspector*, I'm sorry. I had hoped that you could keep your people under a tighter rein than this. I really must insist that you explain yourselves for this unwarranted intrusion.' His temper was rising over the top of the spell, despite his best efforts.

'You are accused of the intended murder by sacrificial means, of your secretary Mary Brookes, some time this evening.'

'Oh, that phone call was from *you*? I thought it was a crank call. Although I must say, it certainly caused Mary a great deal of upset. I imagine that was why she didn't show up for work this morning. I

suppose I have you to thank for that. I was going to take her out for a drink this evening to cheer her up.'

'I'm afraid that you'll be otherwise engaged this evening, helping us with our enquiries.'

'Oh, I don't think so, Inspector. I've nothing to hide, and I can assure you that I don't subscribe to the ethic of climbing the rungs of business through bloodletting.' The smugness was back, painted all over his face. Addison looked to Gordons for support, his resolve beginning to weaken a little. He looked down at the floor, and noticed that there was a sigil where he was standing; it was a standard business design, meant to give the person behind the desk a psychological advantage. It was a step up from simply making your chair higher than your guests, and they had not managed to have the practice outlawed yet. Addison took a step to the side of the desk, the better to get at Varga. Out of the corner of his eye, the councillor noticed that the door to his stationery cupboard was ajar. His calming magic evaporated immediately, as panic rose in his gorge. Peeking from behind the door was Rysk, wearing a ceremonial headdress, goat-eyes staring dully at the councillor.

'That doesn't prove a thing! I...' he fought to talk his way out of the evidence before him. His right arm began to twitch uncontrollably, 'There's an office party in a few days... a fancy dress. It's perfectly reasonable...'

'Exhibit A' Addison said matter-of-factly. He nodded to Nash, who raised his camera on cue. It was a novelty child's instamatic camera, with Kermit the Frog's head made from moulded plastic instead of a button.

'Say cheese!' Nash said, grinning through his walrus-like moustache, and pressed down on Kermit. The flashbulb popped and threw out its light, leaving the gasping councillor with spots before his eyes and more confused than ever. Snatching the photograph from Nash, Addison shook it a few times to speed the developing process, and watched as the image began to coalesce.

'Oh, isn't it cute?' Addison declared, offering it to the other members of his team. Rysk gave an animalistic growl at Varga when he'd seen Nash's handiwork. 'It's a good likeness, don't you think?' He showed it to the councillor, being careful to keep it out of his reach. On Varga's shoulder, plainly visible in a way that no other photographer without Nash's talent (except maybe David Bailey) could capture, was some form of demonic homunculus, its tentacular tail wrapping round his right arm several times. Revealed, the creature sprang into life, puppeteering Varga's arm to garb into the desk drawer to retrieve his athame. In one fluid move he'd drawn it and thrust it into the meat of Addison's leg, eliciting a scream of agony from the burly policeman. Rysk piled onto the councillor and soon had his possessed arm beaten into submission, but the damage had been done. Despite Varga's protestations that he was not controlling the limb, he gave him a few jabs at the same time, for luck. Luck of a sort was with Addison, since the blade had not been coated with venom, but it was little compensation to him there and then.

His leg on fire with pain, Addison managed to remain upright, and as Rysk wrestled Varga to his feet, he saw a glint of metal at the councillor's throat. He fished it out with a biro, and it was revealed as some kind of an amulet in the shape of a burning candle. Not any of the cults that Addison was familiar with, he demanded, 'What is this?' He received nothing but a hateful look in reply. 'I'd give me an answer, or I might decide to leave you alone with Rysk here for a few minutes, while I do the paperwork.'

'Call my lawyer.' was all that Varga would say.

Addison looked at the space just above Varga's right shoulder, addressing the invisible creature. 'I thought we'd already met.'

The air was filled with a low machine drone, noticeable only when first entering the TARDIS, but tuned out after a few minutes. It had been a long time since the young man had had any opportunity to escape the noise. His tutor, his mentor, his sensei, the Doctor disapproved of him being allowed to wander abroad unaccompanied, and had whispered to his ship to make sure that his little excursions remained within certain bounds. It took some getting used to, living without an open sky, and breathing reconstituted air, and most of all, the rooms that moved around, as if sorcery was plucking his destination from his mind. Arthur placed his trust in the Doctor, or Merlin, as he knew him better. This exile was for his own protection, until he was ready to face his destiny, and wrench the Thirteen Worlds from the grip of the tyrant queen, Morgaine. Sometimes the way was hard, but he had been learning his lessons

well. Lord Merlin was not one for excessive encouragement, but Arthur knew that he was proud of how far he had come. Surely it must be soon that he would be allowed to return to his fiefdoms; to do what must be done? Until then, he must content himself with all this unnecessary schooling. He returned his attention to the book, a treatise on the forms of High Speech spoken in the Thirteen Worlds. According to Merlin, his accent was slipping. What did it matter, when he could place an arrow between two intertwined branches of Ygg's tree, barely two fingers across, and cleave three bodies with but a single stroke. At least, he was assured that the sacks of grain he had been provided with for practice were equivalent to three lightly armoured opponents. It was not the same. Arthur read the same line for the umpteenth time. He grew weary of the book, and thought that he might just rest his eyes for a...

'Thwack!' The Doctor shut Arthur's face in the book, shocking him back to alertness. There was a hint of mischief in his eyes, but the rest of his face seemed like it was about to summon a storm upon him.

'Arthur. We've been over this a hundred times or more. You *must* speak as you are expected to, or the nobles will not take you seriously. You must take these baby-steps before you can stride, or you'll fall flat on your face.' The Doctor seemed more irritable that angry, as if the lessons were infinitely duller to him that they were to Arthur.

'Surely it's more important what I say than how I say it?'

'There's truth in that, boy. But your people are a superstitious lot. They won't accept your claim to rule them unless they can understand what you're saying. You start talking like a 21st Century scally, and they're going to be more inclined to burn you at the stake, no matter how many swords you've pulled from stones.'

'I still say that I don't need all these books, Merlin. If I have a strong arm, and the will to back it up, they will submit to me.'

The Doctor sighed, shaking his head imperceptibly. 'There is too much of your father in you. You are the culmination of an extensive selective breeding programme; the product of forces beyond even my control. You are the one foretold, but if your head continues to swell like this, you will never get through the TARDIS doors, let alone be fit to meet your destiny.'

'When, Merlin? When can I get out of here? Every day I spend reading these texts,' he throws the book down to punctuate his point, 'is a further day for Morgaine to strengthen her grip on the Thirteen Worlds. We're wasting time!'

'Time? Time is the one thing we have in abundance. We'll talk about this later.'

'But...'

'*Later.*' With that, the Doctor vacated the classroom, leaving Arthur to ponder.

As the Doctor struck off through the roundel-lit corridor of his ship, the TARDIS invisibly worked behind the scenes, reconfiguring the internal architecture to suit the Doctor's needs, telepathically exploiting the symbiotic link between Time Lord and machine, unasked. Unlike his young pupil, the Doctor was entirely at home in such an environment. During extended sabbaticals outside of his home, he would occasionally become confused when the architecture did not attune itself to his mood.

At the first door he chanced upon, the Doctor grasped the handle and stepped into the room. He did not knock, as though privacy was a foreign concept to him these days.

The room was very much the same as the one from which he had just been; whether this was just a standard room template, or one of the TARDIS' little temporal tricks, even he was not absolutely sure. Where the previous room had been Spartan and workmanlike, this one was a little softer, with toys and clothes scattered about the place in a haphazard manner. The room's occupant was a boy of no more than eight, and he had not noticed the Doctor's entrance, concentrating as he was upon his play. He had two little hand-carved wooden manikins, dressed in finest silk kimonos, and was conducting a conversation between the two of them. The boy had the same telltale oak-coloured hair, with a cowlick at the front, much as the youth in the other classroom, with the same piercing eyes of hazel. They had to be close kin at the very least. He made the two figures bow elaborately to each other, and then made them sit down on the floor. The quality of manufacture that went into the construction of the dolls meant that he was able to convincingly sit them in a lotus position before each other.

The Doctor decided to stand and watch for a while, intrigued by the semblance of life being played out before him. He was immensely proud of the boy, carefully going through every gesture, every

The property was refurbished and turned to another purpose, long since lost to the mists of time, as when the Twentieth Century reared its head, and the year 1968 in particular, the property was acquired for a substantial sum, by a gentleman calling himself Bell, presumed to be a descendant of the property's founder. He announced his intent to return the building back to its original form and reinstate its original purpose, as a Gentlemen's Club. The hook was that everything within the confines of the club should be as true to 1830 as possible, down to the members' clothes and behaviour. It drew a small, but wealthy clientele, eager to spend a few hours escaping the demands of the modern age, in a variation upon the Hellfire Club. The membership grew even more formidable during the 1980's, with the breed of businessman who held to mottoes such as 'Greed is Good', and their peculiar contribution to the world of art: the business card.

The club maintained simple rules, of which the most important was that nobody was to speak of what went on within the club to a non-member. Whatever debauched acts they partook of, it remained secret and could not touch their outer lives. Many men with important positions in multinationals or high office were members of the 1830 Club, but names, like their outside clothes, were left at the threshold; stripped away and forgotten until the time came to leave.

Master Bell unlocked the ornate door to the sanctum, with a key that he always wore about his neck. The key bore a motif, that of a burning candle. His pasty complexion and cold moist flesh made him look unwell, though he was in remarkable shape for a man of his age, if you could truly call him a man. As he entered the chamber, his colleague, the elusive Master Book was there to greet him. If Bell looked sickly, Book looked as though he had just been dug from the ground. His yellow parchment dry skin was so tight upon his features that his mouth remained permanently in a rictus grin. The skin around his eyes had shrunken, leaving them lidless and unblinking. His head had the barest covering of fine wispy hair, clumped together, without any true pattern. He did not so much walk as glide across the flagstones to Bell's side. His hands moved constantly, in some form of rudimentary sign language, accompanied by a sort of wheezing rattle whistling through his unmoving teeth.

'Well met, Master Book.' The more communicative of the two proclaimed. 'It is nearly the appointed time. Our brethren have been busy, propitiating the Powers in preparation for His coming.'

'THIS TIME... NO MISTAKES...' Book thought/sent words in a primal shout of mental energy, directed deep into Bell's brain, making him wince with its power.

'That is so. This time, the summoning *will* be concluded, and our Lord will finally be whole.' As if on cue, a bestial rumble came from the darkest depths of the club.

'Brought you some grapes, guv,' Natalie Gordons smiled sheepishly at her bedridden superior. She had Rysk and Jean Tynan in tow, 'Here, take 'em before the human dustbin here scoffs the lot.' She indicated Rysk, who affected an air of innocence, but not very convincingly. Gordons passed the crumpled paper bag to Addison; he had been in the hospital for less than a day, but was already climbing the walls.

'Anything happening?' He tried to sit up, but felt a twinge in his leg that cut through the elephant-stunning painkillers he'd been given, and gave it up as a bad job.

'Quiet night, boss,' Rysk said, 'Silence, he holds the fort for you. Says to say hello, how you feeling?'

'Ah, I'm sweet. Got sunshine in a bag, me,' Addison lied. He looked at the way Rysk kept glancing at the untouched bag of grapes on the bed. The more Addison ignored them, the more Rysk found himself drawn to look at the bag, unable to hold his concentration on anything else. After a few minutes chit-chat, milking the moment, Addison picked up the bag, grunting as he did so, and dropped them nearer to Ryskowicz, 'Go on. Knock yourself out.' The look of relief on Rysk's face was a picture. Gordons tutted at her gift's rejection, as one might berate a child, when you were trying not to laugh at their antics. Rysk's similarity to a faithful old dog with a treat was marked. His gratitude knew no bounds.

'So there's nothing I can help with?' Addison cajoled, desperate for something to keep his brain from seizing up among the hernia patient and the chronic bedwetter that flanked his bed in the ward.

'Not really. There's been an upswing in cult activity, but nothing that we haven't got covered.' Tynan spoke up for the first time during the visit. She kept her hands firmly planted in her pockets to make sure that she did not accidentally touch something. Her psychometric talent could be a real hindrance, especially in a busy place like a hospital. Obviously, they would conduct regular cleansings of the

property in order to prevent the possibility of a haunting, but there was no sense in taking the chance that they cut corners here and there, to stretch their budget. Thinking about that spurred her to remember something from earlier in the day. 'Oh, do you remember that cleanser guy, Hernandez? *Gee* Hernandez?' She adopts a New York homeboy posture, grabbing her crotch suggestively as she affected an impersonation of him for her colleagues' amusement, 'Call me "Gee". Ey, you should meet my uncle Tony. He's in Waste Management back home. He's like, he's a consultant or sumthin'. He'd like ta meetcha, if ya know waddImean…'

Rysk applauded her performance loudly, 'Heh! He's just like that!'

Tynan dropped the act before continuing with her story, 'He stopped by with another basket of chocolates, handing out his business cards as always. It's not like we don't give him all the department's work in any case. When he heard you were in the hospital, it was all we could do to stop him from buying a bouquet and marching straight over here with it. I managed to convince him that you're not really the flowers type. He's going to drop a bottle of bourbon into the station to help with your *recuperation*. I figured you'd be happy with that.'

'I'd be happier if you'd brought it with you… Anyway, enough of that guy. Have you had any joy finding a match for that symbol on Councillor Varga's amulet?'

'Not yet. Amanda's been sifting through the records to try and identify it, but it's not one that's in the database, so if it *is* a cult, as you thought, it hasn't been active in recent memory. Certainly not since the Sugarvirus hardwiped our systems, anyway. Not the answer you were hoping for, I'm sure…'

'Keep at it anyway. If Amanda needs another pair of hands with the old paper files, I can get them to discharge me whenever you like.'

'Christ on a bike, chief!' Gordons said, 'You really *do* want out of here, don't you? What's the matter? Don't you like the smell of wee, or something?'

John Silence, Papal exorcist and special Vatican envoy to the Malleus, steeled himself as he prepared to enter the cells beneath the station. This was where the *special* prisoners were held; the ones who could not be incarcerated in just any old gaol. Some of the livelier arcane texts were stored down here too, where they could be prevented from eating the other books, and unwitting students on work experience. But that was not the purpose of his visit tonight. His hand paused at his clerical collar, and he thought about activating his halo before entering, but decided against it. This particular prisoner was not impressed by such trickery; he had laughed at it in the past. Silence removed his jacket and folded it neatly in a pile, which he placed carefully against the stone wall, on a rough bench. Surprisingly for a man of the cloth, Silence had a well-defined physique, the product of many hours alone in the gym. His muscles were displayed proudly in his sleeveless shirt. He crossed himself and said a short prayer/incantation to invoke God's protection, and traced the sigil which would allow him entry to the viewing room, a sort of airlock between the inner cell and the rest of the Malleus building. The viewing room was daubed from floor to ceiling with protective devices. Silvered crosses were embedded in the walls, and angelic script covered every space between, providing all the illumination the little room required. A word of power caused the cell door to shimmer into transparency, so that Silence could observe without being observed. Inside, poised Atlas-like, a Daemon crouched, grown to huge dimensions, attempting to prise the room from the building, without success. It seemed to be his pet project, and he seemed content to wait his time and let the ages weaken the foundations above, allowing his escape. The Daemon's nostril twitched, and he turned to look directly at Silence, despite the safeguards designed to stop such detection.

Silence tapped the microphone and spoke through the feedback as it whistled to itself.

'In the name of the Most Holy, I command you to reduce yourself to human proportions.' His voice was used to issuing such demands, fired by his faith. Nonetheless, it had little effect on the beast.

'MAKE ME.' It laughed at him, scornfully.

'We can never do this the easy way, can we?' Silence said under his breath, but he had expected nothing less. Mouthing a word silently, while covering his face from the Daemon's prying eyes, he made the sigilform to allow him egress into the cell, without fear. The door immediately replaced the ward as soon as he was inside, allowing no chance for the creature to get past him. It grabbed at him playfully, but its extreme size made it almost impossible to move freely, and Silence was able to avoid

his clumsy grasp. In the momentary vulnerability of transition to a more convenient size, Silence threw himself upon the Daemon, trying to get him into an arm-lock, while also reaching into his belt for something, but the creature twisted out of his grip. It backhanded Silence across the cell, displaying more than human strength. As it attempted to press the attack, grabbing at the priest, Silence ducked low and rugby-tackled the goat-legged creature to the ground. As close as he was, Silence felt foetid breath hot upon him. He began to pray, not in a placid church service kind of way, but spitting the words defiantly as the creature writhed beneath him. 'Lo, as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.' The words seemed to sting the Daemon, but no more than that. It managed to shuck the priest off, and began to stomp upon the floor for effect, sending shockwaves through the building, even though the room had been modified to dampen such theatrics. Feeling like a weaponless matador facing the bull of Minos, Silence held his ground, touching his crucifix for succour. His mind was racing, unable to concentrate on any of the prepared spells he'd spent hours in the performance of for just such an eventuality.

'OPEN THE WAY, AND I'LL LET YOU LIVE.' The Daemon bartered.

Silence spoke again, 'I command you to shed this Daemonic form and let your more pleasing aspect rise instead...' He waited to see whether his words were having any effect before continuing. 'By the power of your true name, I command it... *Koschei*.' The speaking of that name enraged the Daemon beyond measure, and it broke into a lunge. Instead of trying to avoid the attack, Silence embraced it, running into its arms, his hands clenched in preparation. As the Daemon began to crush him, he was able to get close enough to do what he had been planning all along. He crammed handfuls of communion wafers into the beast's maw, as it thrashed about in adulation. Silence felt the breath being forced from his lungs under the inhuman bear hug, but managed to spit out the litany all the same, '*The... body... of... Christ...*'

The Daemon's reaction was like lightning. Dropping the priest immediately, it attempted to spit out the crushed wafers, popping and crackling on its tongue like Space Dust, but far more devastating in its effect. No longer aware of Silence, the Daemon went into agonised spasms, it's howls of pain threatening to deafen the priest. Against this background, Silence shouted to the extent of his lungs' diminished capacity, 'You *know* what you have to do! You will *obey* me.' It was as if a dam had burst, with light spilling from the Daemon's mouth from the effect of the holy wafers, but an unbelievable transformation was taking place. Two bodies occupied the same space for a heartbeat, trading organs and limbs in jigsaw manner; a ribcage grew itself out of nowhere, caging three, no, two hearts, as feral goat-legs took on a more human-like demeanour. When the transition was over, nothing of the Daemon remained, and in his stead, there was merely a man. Naked and close to exhaustion from the bodily gymnastics, Koschei's legs gave way beneath him, but Silence was there to stop him from falling to the floor.

The cell was sparsely furnished, and what little furniture had been there was smashed by the Daemon's growth spurt, but there was a black silken robe that Koschei was able to put on to cover his modesty. In fact, it was more by Silence's request. Koschei had little concern about his nudity. He spat out the remnants of communion wafer, smacking his lips distastefully at the aftertaste of the things.

The preliminaries out of the way, Silence brought up the reason for his visit. He produced an evidence bag, containing the talisman confiscated from Neil Varga, with its burning candle motif. He studied Koschei's eyes carefully, and detected a spark of recognition there.

'Ah, you *do* know it, then? Tell me what you know...'

'The Candle. Tell me, priest, have you ever heard the children's rhyme that goes "Here comes a candle to light you to bed, here comes a chopper to chop off your head?"'

'I've heard it, yes.'

'It was written about *this*,' He poked at the evidence bag to illustrate his meaning, 'In the same way Ring'a'ring'a'roses alluded to the Black Death, this rhyme refers to something much worse.'

'*Worse* than the Black Death?'

'Much.'

The Doctor's pocket began to emit a bleeping noise. It was his pocket watch, reminding him of something. He had experimented with tying knots in his handkerchief for a time, but when he had to start tying other knots in order to remind him what the previous knot represented, he knew that it was

part of the tea ceremony, even though he had witnessed it a single time in the Orient. His attention to detail was astounding, and best of all was his decision to re-enact that, of all the sights they had encountered in Japan. He was a boy unlike any other; he did not ask for toy guns or the trappings of war. His interests were on a higher plane altogether. That was his mother's heritage playing out, the Doctor believed. The boy was using a small tea bowl to enact the trickier parts of the ceremony for his toys, putting the bowl to their lips, before rotating the bowl and repeating with the other. He had named them Raiko and Tsannu, to honour fellow travellers whose paths they had crossed. The tea ritual complete, he made the dolls stand, and bow low before each other. He then started to draw their delicate, but incredibly detailed little swords from their scabbards in preparation for combat.

The Doctor cleared his throat, making the boy start, dropping the dolls. He turned and saw who had made the noise and leapt up, propelling himself towards the Doctor, a hug already prepared for him. A little embarrassed by the child's show of emotion, the Doctor allowed it to continue for a moment before shooing him away.

'Merlin! Have you come to read me another story?'

The Doctor attempted to maintain an impassive air of schoolmasterly distance, but the boy's innocent charm wormed its way through his defences, and he took his little hands in his own, and spoke softly. 'Not today.' The boy's face fell, disappointment obvious to see.

'Instead, I thought that today we would read one *together*. How would you like that, my boy? Hmm?' His little eyes lit up at the prospect. Literally shaking with excitement, the boy led the Doctor to the library, pulling all the way, eager to know what they were going to read. The decision taken, they retired to the boy's bedroom rather than the sombre classroom, and the Doctor sat on the edge of the bed. Above their heads, a homemade mobile spun gently in the recirculated air of the ship, alternating facsimiles of white and red dragons, twisting this way and that, throwing long shadows about the room, gently lit with a fireside glow at intervals across the walls by roundels. They settled down to begin...

'*The Hobbit. By J.R.R. Tolkien. Chapter One...*'

Some time later, when the boy's excitement had given way to exhaustion, the Doctor took his leave, and as he paused by the doorway for a final glance, the TARDIS automatically reduced the level of light in the room to a minimal amount, to better serve its guest's needs.

The ship gave a little stretch and relocated the architecture once again, bringing the Doctor back to the older boy's room. This time, he knocked.

'Enter.' When the door opened, he saw the young Arthur sitting at his work desk, attentive to his textbook. The Doctor was sure that he would have spotted if he had only just snatched it up before he could witness him at leisure.

'How are you finding the book?' he enquired, looking into Arthur's eyes carefully, awaiting his response.

''Tis most enlightening, Lord Merlin. I will have it finished upon the morrow, if it please you?' There was no trace of sarcasm in his voice that the Doctor could detect, at any rate.

The Doctor smiled. He had been unsure of his actions, and it was something that his previous selves would have frowned upon, but he was no longer the man he used to be, thank goodness. He took comfort in the self-justification that one could bend the rules a smidgeon within the confines of the TARDIS, with its state of temporal grace. Allowing himself a little mental pat on the back, he made to leave, but Arthur stops him.

'Merlin? I'm still *dying* for a good scrap...'

Master Bell made his way to the inner sanctum of the 1830 Club, a most exclusive Gentlemen's Club, with a grand heritage behind it. The place looked exactly as it had when it was built at the turn of the 19th Century. At its founding, Master Bell and his silent partner (in more ways than one), Master Book had opened with a future-looking club for the young gadabout around town of the day, but as the year of its title arrived, its true purpose became clear. A mysterious fire consumed the place and all within it, before 1830 was out. There were rumours of devilry and also some kind of insurance swindle, since who would want to be seen to be backward looking when 1831 arrived? Since neither Bell nor the mysterious Book surfaced to claim their booty, this rumour swiftly died, apparently with them.

not really achieving its purpose. He patted his pocket sharply, silencing the alert immediately, and made his way to the console room. There were wheels to set in motion, and plates to keep spinning.

John Silence emerged from the cell a degree paler than when he had entered. If Koschei's silver tongue had spoken truly, then he needed to see the...

'Doctor! The very man I need to see!' The priest was surprised to find the Time Lord slouched in an easy chair in the Malleus waiting room, checking his watch. The Doctor looked up, snapping the watch case shut and pocketing the device.

'How is the old devil?' he asked, spotting the sweat of a good work-out upon the young priest.

'Much the same. He still refuses to let you see him. I think he feels... *embarrassed*.'

'Hmph,' the Doctor snorted, 'Doesn't surprise me any more, the lengths he was willing to go to for a taste of power. It always ended up biting him on the behind, whichever universe he was native to.'

Silence cut short the Doctor's meditation on the past, and explained the nature of the current situation. He showed him the candle's symbol, and how they came upon it, followed by the things which he had prised from Koschei, whose Daemonic host knew many things of value to the Malleus, if you could winnow the truth from his lips. In the aftermath of the Sugarvirus assault, they had been forced to rely upon his counsel more than was comfortable. Koschei seemed to relish his new status as an oracle, despite his miserable circumstances.

'So, all these sacrifices are because of some kind of syzygy, a heavenly conjunction of other Earths?' The Doctor enquired, and Silence nodded. 'And the last such occurrence was in 1830. I wouldn't trust Koschei as far as I could drop him down a well, but that concurs with certain facts that I'm aware of. I knew that this was going to happen sooner or later. Thank you, John. You've given me the final piece in the puzzle. I shall have to take another of my sabbaticals, and there's something I need you to do for me...'

'Arthur? I've got some good news for you.' The Doctor bustled into the young man's room without knocking, finding him practicing his swordplay with a wooden practice blade and a sack of grain suspended from the ceiling. He turned to face his teacher, eyes bright.

'Morgaine? The time is now? Finally, we go to reclaim my heritage, Merlin?' He clenched a fist triumphantly.

'Not exactly,' the Doctor replied, holding something behind his back, where Arthur could not see it, 'We're going on a little field trip.' Arthur wore an expression of puzzled disappointment.

'A field trip? Where, then?'

'1830. We've a little trial for you, my boy.'

'Why would I be interested in going anywhere but to face the witch, Morgaine? Answer me that, teacher!'

'Because...' the Time Lord began, 'I might let you play with this.' From behind his back, he produced a magnificent sword, known throughout the Thirteen Worlds for an age. *Excalibur.*

'The sword of my father?' Arthur marvelled, 'How didst you come by the fabled blade, master?' His voice slipped in and out of the High Speech, in his excitement.

'Well,' the Doctor leaned in conspiratorially, 'I haven't actually given it to him yet...'

'The sword was thy doing? Truly, you are most wondrous, Lord Maker.

The Doctor shrugged off the shower of admiration, 'I am but a humble servant of Time.' He presented the sword to Arthur pommel first, and as he tentatively took it, he slowly pulled the scabbard from it, allowing the blade to see the light for the first time in many years. Its surface shone, and careful examination revealed a spiders-web thin lattice of engraving upon it, reminiscent of a circuit board diagram, etched deep into the alien metal. Arthur reached to take back the scabbard, but the Doctor pulled it away, 'No. You must carry it naked. I have need of this elsewhere.'

Arthur's surprise gave way to a sort of mesmerism as he looked upon the sword. What need had he of the scabbard anyway? The sword was the important part, and it was probably just Merlin's way of hinting that Excalibur would not sleep in his hand for long.

The Malleus sat in conclave, with Silence sitting in for the hospitalised Jack Addison, despite his protestations. Addison had threatened to discharge himself, until Silence had offered to have him sedated, and subjected to one or two other procedures. 'Such language from a man of the cloth,' Addison had commented before conceding the point.

Amanda Hopkins had been researching the 1830 Club, and presented the unit with a dossier drawn from the small amount of information in the database, along with some yellowing files dating back to the fire which consumed the place over a century and a half earlier. Their attempts to use the Mappa Mundi, their supernatural globe, able to pinpoint supernatural activity to whatever scale they required, had met with misfortune. There was some kind of interference playing havoc with its magics, worse than static on a television screen. Koschei had warned Silence about the likelihood of that happening, with the impending syzygy. The conjunction was likely to cause havoc with the higher planes, and any high order spells would be likely to go on the fritz. In preparation for this, Silence had already given key personnel their instructions.

This was just the sort of situation that Spiny Norman would want to take advantage of, so he had a few men in place, standing ready in case he broke cover. They believed him to be in hibernation, but it was better to be over-cautious.

It had been decided that the 1830 Club would have to be infiltrated. As a Gentlemen's Club, none of the women would be allowed past the door, so Natalie Gordons and Jean Tynan were to help Amanda Hopkins to coordinate operations from the station, while Silence, Nash and Rysk went undercover. Nash had been forcibly made to tidy himself up a bit, to make him look a little less like a tramp. Rysk was perhaps a little too difficult to even attempt a makeover, so they had settled for a bath, a change of clothes and pulling his hair back into a ponytail, in the hope that he might pass as an eccentric. It was hoped that all eyes would focus on Silence, as he would be leading the way.

Around the table sat an assortment of folk from the gentry. They all had one thing in common: grief beyond bearing. That was why they were in attendance at this séance; an attempt to reach out to their loved ones, and pull a little comfort from their period of loss. Some of the people were séance haunters, regulars at these affairs, as if addicted to the things. As long as the money was good, the clairvoyants were unconcerned. Others came in hopes of finding the location of some treasure or other, usually long since pawned, and the disappearance hidden until their death, and the cold light of day revealed it. Behind closed doors after a performance, the clairvoyant and his accomplice would laugh at the gullibility of humanity, and toast their profitable venture. Of course, if they truly possessed the power to divine the whereabouts of secret fortunes, they would have kept the information for themselves.

'Now, everyone must hold hands with the person to their left and right around the table. I must stress, this circle must not be broken during the séance, or it may bring grave repercussions upon my head. And we wouldn't want that, would we ladies?' The clairvoyant winked at a couple of regulars, the spinster sisters, Ruth and Elizabeth Clayborn.

They giggled like schoolgirls, 'Certainly not, Mister Lees!' before grasping for hands, eager to begin the session. To Ruth's right sat Sebastian Malchance, and beside him, his sister Amelia. Their reason for attending the séance was somewhat different to the others, and they felt a little uncomfortable among the assembled strangers. Ruth gave Sebastian's hand a little squeeze of encouragement.

The lights dimmed as Lees went through the remainder of his instructions to the assembled. He was at pains to create a mood of foreboding in the drawing room, and give the impression that he would be unable to produce the effects they were about to witness by artificial means. He insisted that Elizabeth Clayborn, and an old gentlemen, both of whom he called by their first name, proving that this was not their first visit to his circle, placed a foot on each of his own, so that they could be assured that he was unable to leave his seat. This sort of attention to detail was what made him so wildly popular with the gentlefolk of the city, and the hit of the day since his emergence on the circuit in 1829.

He went through the usual motions of inducing a trance, with much moaning and thrashing about, until his sudden cessation of movement gave all the impression that contact with the higher planes had been attained. This was where his accomplice Chaney came into his own. From the vantage point of the attic above the drawing room, with a tiny spyhole through the ceiling below, Chaney's talent for exploiting his unique vocal chords came into play. He had been born with an uncanny ability for mimicry,

and had acquired the art of ventriloquism, enabling him to speak in all manner of voices, and appear to be in many places at once. The combination of Chaney and Lees was the key to their success.

'Do we have anyone here who wishes to speak to a woman by the name of Mary?' Lees volunteered, and there was a murmuring from the guests, as they thought about whether they had ever known a Mary. Up in the attic room, Chaney was a little concerned, as Lees was once again straying from the prepared script for the evening. He was perfectly aware that Chaney preferred to impersonate men, and had promised to adhere to it this evening, as the mimic had a touch of the cholic, putting a strain on his performance. Lees himself was unsure where he had come up with the name, but put it out of his mind, soldiering on, 'No? I'm sorry Mary, but there is no-one here who wishes to speak to you tonight...' He backtracked, with the intention of returning to the planned scenario.

'*I* would very much like to talk to Mary.' Sebastian Malchance spoke up, his voice a challenge to the clairvoyant.

'Er... what? I'm sorry, young sir... Mary's going... she's going away... she's gone.'

Sebastian snorted derisively, but his sister squeezed down on his hand viciously, halting his outburst.

'I do apologise, sir. I am but a humble servant of the spirits. I can only ask and they choose to respond or not, as they will. Oh, now I have another of the dearly departed who wishes to communicate this evening. Why, I know this spirit... Miss Clayborn, I believe it is your old flame. It is...'

'George? Oh my dear sweet boy! Do you have a message for me?' Ruth jigged up and down in her place, though she remembered not to break the circle in her excitement.

Lees slipped his foot from his shoe, through a special adapted heel, which was hinged for that purpose, and raised his knee beneath the table, making a single dull rap with his knee, and sending a tremble through the circle of hands. 'Do you wish to speak to Ruth, George? I give you voice to say your piece.'

Chaney made his voice echo around the room, as if he was everywhere at once. He made it sound as though he was a long way distant, fooling the old woman into recognising her long dead fiancé. 'My love, I just wanted to hear your voice again. I long for the time when we shall be together again in our Lord's garden. We shall have no need of earthly trinkets there. You must promise me that you will make fullest use of your wealth before you come to me, my Ruth? Will you do that?'

'Of course, George! What use is mere money when I am without you? I shall dispose of it henceforth.'

'There's a good girl. You can't take it with you. Never has truer word been spoken. I feel that you will soon be with me...' Elizabeth gasped at the implication. Chaney went on, 'Do not be sad for your sister, Elizabeth. She will be with our Lord and I. Instead you should rejoice that her loneliness will soon be at an end.'

'I shall give all my possessions to Elizabeth!' Ruth said, caught in the moment.

'NO!' Chaney almost shouted, 'I mean... you must spend it on those whose friendship you have cherished in your last years. Would you wish to pass the burden of wealth to your sister, in her twilight years?'

'Oh no...' Ruth agreed readily, 'Might I gift the man who has done so much to bring us together, the wonderful Mister Lees?'

'That would be most satisfactory, my darling. Now, I must go. The host of angels are calling to me to join their song. I will see you again soon.'

'Oh... so soon? Goodbye, my George! I will do just as you say, have no fear. Goodb...'

'And he's going... going... gone. Did he have anything of import to say, dear lady?'

'Yes, yes he did. I am to be with him again soon, in the arms of our Lord! Isn't it simply wonderful?

'Isn't it just?' Sebastian commented dryly. Amelia squeezed his hand again, but this time he looked her in the eye and squeezed back harder, though he said nothing else.

Lees took the floor again, drawing attention back to himself, 'I am feeling a little fatigued, so we may only attempt to reach one more spirit this evening. Mister and Miss... Malchance, is it? You wished to be reunited with a loved one? Your father recently passed over? Is that so?' Amelia had told Lees their reason for coming at the door when they were ushered inside, 'I will attempt to reach him in the afterlife, at your urging. Please do not be too disappointed if he is unable to make contact. He may not have found his way to his rest yet. But I shall try as many times as you wish me to.'

Lees went through his trance ritual once again, quicker this time, as if impatient to skip to the end, 'What was your father's name?'

'Edward.' Sebastian supplied.

'Edward Malchance? I have your daughter and your son with me... They would like to speak with you tonight. Is Edward Malchance there?' No answer. Lees pressed on, 'If you are unable to speak with voice, please show us some other sign of your presence. Something to tell your children that you are with us.' At his cue, Chaney began to tug at a catgut line prepared earlier; tied around a wine glass in the middle of the table, invisible in the half-light. He made the glass vibrate a little before making it dance into the air, all the time urged on by the psychic charlatan, Lees.

Suddenly, the glass fell and smashed on the floor. The Malchances stood up at once

'*Do not break the circle!*' Lees screeched at the top of his lungs. The other attendees began to gasp and grew disturbed by the turn of events. Amelia ignited a flare, which threw of sparks and clearly made visible a couple of things. Her brother holding the knife with which he had cut the catgut, moments before, and the figure of Chaney through the skylight pulling up his cut line, his blackened face set in panic at the discovery. The other séance-goers were in disarray. They all got to their feet, starting to mill around in confusion.

Rather than attempt to bluff it out, Lees threw a punch at Sebastian, catching him a beauty across the face. Amelia came at him from the side, pushing and pulling at the exposed charlatan ineffectually. There was a muffled thud at the door, as Chaney flew down the stairs in order to make his escape. Lees took the time to pound on the engineer of his downfall a couple more times. Sebastian held his hands in front of his face in a foppish attempt at defence, no more successful than his sister's, and he was dragged across the table by the burly psychic, held by his collar.

'Gri...!' Sebastian started to scream, but before Lees could do anything else, he had a feeling that someone was behind him; he did not need to be truly psychic for that. Lees felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned, snarling. The first thing he saw was Chaney lying prone by the open front door, and a wall obscuring his exit. Looking up, he saw that the wall was in fact a man of huge proportions. Each of his fists looked like a side of meat, and his smile was a promise of things to come.

'You shouldn't'a oughta done that.' Lights out for Mister Lees.

'About time, Grimm!' Sebastian chided, 'I could have been killed there, you know!' He dabbed at his face with the tablecloth, relieved at the absence of blood on it. He turned to his sister. 'Does it look horrendous, Amelia? Tell me at once... I can take the news.'

Amelia sighed at her brother's antics, 'You're as handsome as ever, brother. You'll still be fighting them off with a swordstick, don't worry.' Sebastian looked relieved. He went over to the supine body of Lees, and gave it a well-placed kick in the ribs.

'Our father sends his regards, you blackguard! And his name is Jeremy, not Edward, you fraud!' He gave the body another kick for good measure, before his manservant pulled him away. The other séance-goers had by this time gone on their way, comforting each other as they went, as best they could. Grimm had already alerted the authorities, so all that remained was for them to make their exit, stage left.

Sebastian's face stung as the cold air hit it when they got outside. Grimm was opening the door to their coach for Amelia to step inside, when they heard something.

'What's that noise, Grimm?'

'Don't know, Miss,' he answered, straining to hear the sound, like birdsong, but too unnatural for that. The beeping grew louder, with the approach of two figures. They must have been players from the theatre, by the manner of their dress. One of them was a mere youth, dressed as if in some historical pageant, complete with a sword at his belt. The other, an older man, was staring at his pocket-watch, as though it were some kind of compass. Sebastian stood firm in their path. As they got close, the noise grew faster and shriller. Finally, when it looked as though the man was about to collide with Sebastian, he stopped dead in his tracks, and looked up, shutting his watch case with a snap.

'Hello! I'm the Doctor, and this is my friend Arthur. You must be Sebastian Malchance. How do you do?' and he stuck out his hand in greeting. Hesitantly, Sebastian took it, and proceeded to have his hand pumped vigorously.

'Do... Do I know you?' Sebastian stuttered, sure that he could never have forgotten such a fellow.

'Well now, there's a question...' the Doctor responded, still shaking Malchance's hand with enthusiasm, until he was finally able to extract it. Grimm came around to make sure that his young master was not in any danger. 'Stand down, Mister Grimm. There will be plenty of time for fisticuffs later, I'll be bound.'

'If we don't know you, sir, how is it that you know of us? Are you acquainted with our father?' Amelia enquired of the strange man, in his outlandish garb. Why he dressed almost like a wog!

'It's difficult to say, Miss Amelia, if you'll pardon my familiarity. When you can remember the future, it can sometimes be so difficult to keep one's memories straight...'

'What a queer thing to say! I don't know whether to laugh, or get Grimm to thump you.'

'Well, I've always preferred a good laugh myself,' the Doctor said hopefully, with a smile.

Arthur was getting a little agitated, the Doctor could sense. His hand was straying to his sword belt, and that could set the plates crashing to the ground. While he continued to chat with Amelia, he gestured wildly with his left hand behind his back at Arthur, slapping his hand away from his belt.

'We're all friends here. May I be so bold as to suggest that we retire somewhere for a cup of tea? I'm absolutely parched.'

'Tea? I don't know if I...' Amelia started to protest, but the Doctor shushed her with an upraised finger.

'Yes, and you can tell me all about these bodies you keep finding on the streets, hmm?'

'This club is for members only, sir.' The receptionist appeared to have been grown from a vat, as his supercilious manner was identical to a million others across the world. This was his domain, and woe betide anyone unfortunate enough to cross his path without performing due obeisance and conforming to the rules, as carved in stone across his heart...

'We'd like to join,' Silence said, his appearance the epitome of the modern businessman, once you got him out of his all black clerical ensemble. If only the same could have been said about Nash and Rysk. Gordons had attempted to tell Nash that designer stubble went out with Don Johnson and Miami Vice, but he would have none of it. He was still smarting from the enforced early visit to the barber. With Rysk, they had done their very best in the time allotted, but some bodies were not meant to fit inside a suit, and Rysk's was one of them. He pulled at the collar as though it were a noose. They had given him a collarless shirt so that he could escape having to wear a tie, but the starch was causing an allergic reaction on his skin, unless it was the soap.

'I'm sorry, *sir*... The 1830 Club has very *strict* rules of membership, as I'm sure sir will appreciate,' Although he was a good foot and a half shorter than the incognito priest, the receptionist still managed to look down his nose at Silence, 'If one of the existing members were to recommend you, we might be able to consider your application. *In writing,* of course...'

'I fully understand,' Silence said amicably, but I'd still like to take a quick shufty about the place, if you don't mind? I wouldn't want to waste your or my own valuable time, if the club doesn't live up to its reputation. You *do* understand?' Without waiting for approval, Silence tapped Nash on the shoulder and started off towards the marble staircase to the right of the reception desk' 'Good, good.' Nash pulled Rysk along with him, before he could complete his attempt to wrest a monogrammed pen on the reception area from its chain. The receptionist attempted to block their passage, but as he opened the partition door to leave his station, Silence slammed it hard against him, leaving him dazed on the floor of the reception box, without even breaking his stride. Nash kicked the receptionist's outstretched leg inside his booth and closed the door gently, looking about to make sure that their actions had not been noticed. Luckily, the 1830 Club was so *very* exclusive; there was very little drop-in trade. As he mounted the stairs, Nash paused to open the window on the first landing a little, before hurrying on to join the others.

'Why, Master Malchance! It would be an *honour* for the 1830 Club to accept your application for membership,' the receptionist fawned, 'We believed that your previous *reluctance* to join us was your final word on the matter. I am *so* happy that you have reconsidered, and at such an important time for our little society.'

'The future is here.' Sebastian concurred. His family name was of immense use to him in so many little ways; it negated the necessity for honest toil, and extended him unlimited credit for his gambling endeavours. Now it afforded him the run of the 1830 Club without the need for strong-arm tactics. He found the more physical side of his adventures with his sister all too tiring for his constitution. Luckily, they had Grimm, ever-reliable Grimm to fall back upon, to extricate them from whatever scrapes they had thus far managed to embroil themselves in.

Still a little unsure of this Doctor fellow, or Merlin as the boy kept calling him. How had he known about the bodies? Those poor mashed up street people, discarded on the cobbles of Meteor Street, their innards on display to the world. He felt ashamed at his inaction for so long. It took the death of a beggar he had only given alms to the previous night to convince him to act. He could not look upon the bodies; Amelia had undertaken that malodorous task, but the Doctor had it a'right when he described them as burst balloons. It was as if something had grown inside them, and found their flesh ill-fitting for the task, splitting them open from within. It was happening more often these past three nights. Before a week ago, there had never been such an atrocity, and yet tonight, six lay dead.

Sebastian allowed himself to be given the grand tour of the club, recognising several fellows of his acquaintance, lounging upon leather couches, smoking pipes containing who knew what aromatic herbs. He knew better than to ask. He took careful note of the club layout, for future reference, with special attention paid to the skilful way in which his guide avoided any explanation regarding one of the many doors they passed, snugly nestled between two enormous bookcases, filled with worthy books which, no doubt had never had a spine cracked through usage. The club was a major achievement. It contained almost everything that Sebastian had nothing but disgust towards. That was why his last invitation to join the club had been responded to in the manner he found most fitting; he wiped his backside with it, and returned it, sealed carefully, with a squirt of cologne as a parting gesture. How could they possibly fall for the notion that he would ever consent to be one of them? Lackbrains, the lot of them. If the Doctor was correct, and they were responsible for the atrocities on their very doorstep, Sebastian intended to take the greatest of pleasure in bringing it all crashing down.

The two club members, in their anachronistic period costumes came crashing down the stairs as they tried unsuccessfully to accost Silence and the other Witchhammers. After wrestling a Daemon, humans were child's play for the priest. Following directions laid out in full by the Doctor in a letter which he left for his colleagues, with instructions not to open until he had gone, Silence knew just where they needed to go. He also knew that there would be very few people trying to impede their progress, because they had business to attend to inside the inner sanctum. This gave them pretty much free rein to go straight to their destination, with only a couple of hiccups, soon dealt with.

Things seemed to be going to the Doctor's timetable like clockwork, until they reached the landing where they were supposed to have found the entrance to the inner sanctum. The Doctor explained, in his crabby handwriting, that there should have been a door set between two burly bookcases, yet now that they were here, there was only a single bookcase, stretching across the whole wall. They examined it from all possible angles, looking for hidden doors or sliding mechanisms, without success. They pulled book after book from the case to make sure there wasn't some kind of level mechanism, in true Scooby-Doo style. All they discovered was that none of the books contained any words. Every book was blank and pristine, despite the age of the leather bindings. Nash proved to be their salvation in the end. Something struck him as odd about the whole set-up and he opened the briefcase he'd been cuddling all the time they'd been in the club. Inside, all he'd brought with him was his camera. Kermit appeared to smile up at him, his little plastic mouth agape. Nash abandoned the useless case and took a quick snapshot of the bookcase. He looked intently at the developing Polaroid, alternately shaking it and looking again. Finally, with a triumphant 'Yes!', his hunch was vindicated. In the photograph, the door was there, exactly as the Doctor had predicted. Obviously they had projected some kind of illusory image over the space, and reinforced it with some special kind of hoodoo to keep their secret from being stumbled upon accidentally. Nash stared at the photograph, and only the photograph, stepping into the space where the bookcase was supposed to be, and the illusion shimmered and became mist, melting into the air.

'Right. Who's for an old-fashioned shoulder charge?' He suggested. Silence took one look at the stout oak door, and decided against it.

'Rysk? Tell me you brought along your lockpicks…' He looked at the Street Shaman hopefully. Rysk nodded, and patted his pocket, before realising that he was not wearing his clothes, the first time he had been able to forget that fact. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and wiped his hands down his trousers, like a bowler at the crease, limbering up his fingers for some feat of manual dexterity, before trying the door handle.

'S'open.'

The TARDIS had become immeasurably better at short hops in the time since it had grown accustomed to this universe. Perhaps it had to do with the Doctor's state of mind. Although he put on a great show of just blundering along, bringing things to a happy resolution by luck as much as judgement, it was a show, for the most part. In his obsessive attention to the little details, it seemed as if he had no time for the big picture, but nothing could have been further from the truth. Once the decision had been taken to stop ducking his fate, to actually *accept* that he was to be Merlin, the path became clear. It was not so much that he chose the path, but that the path chose him, he liked to think. It was not a decision he took lightly. No quick spin around the galaxy, upturn a tyrannical empire and back home for tea this time. There were so many details to set *just so*, so many plates to keep spinning. He certainly could not have hoped to prevail without his trusty steed; his Trigger; his TARDIS. Because his need was for perfect timing, the ship was everything that he could have asked for. Perhaps their symbiotic link was deeper than any simple master and servant arrangement.

The ship made an independent decision to override the Doctor's co-ordinates, which would have placed them just outside the door to the inner sanctum, in favour of an attempted materialisation into the space where the door stood. A dangerous gambit, but the automatic displacement systems kicked in, and the ship was shunted sideways, to the next nearest available free space. There was a fifty-fifty chance of it being on one side of the door or the other. On this occasion, fortune favoured the right, and the Doctor, Arthur and the Malchances were a big step closer to their target.

Grimm, their ever-present manservant, was conspicuous by his absence. While Sebastian had been enjoying the dubious pleasure of his initiation into the 1830 Club, he had remained at attention by the Malchance family coach, ready to go to his young master's aid, should he require it, as he had always done. However, when Sebastian returned to the carriage, of Grimm there was nothing to be found. He immediately returned inside the club, but none had seen him leave his position. Sebastian feared the worst, but knew that it would be unwise for him to press the issue, and he had important reconnaissance information to bring to the Doctor... Grimm's disappearance would have to wait.

'Journey's end. Everybody off,' the Doctor stated, intending to try to alleviate the sombre atmosphere, but it did not come out as he intended. Amelia and Sebastian steeled themselves for the trouble ahead. Sebastian had acquired one of his father's pistols, just in case. His father seemed proud of him for the first time, as though his sudden interest in the weapon showed some hint that he was a man after all.

Arthur took Excalibur from his belt, and prepared himself for battle. The time was now. This was the trial that would determine his future. If he passed this, Merlin must acknowledge he was ready to go home. If he did not prevail... well, that was not a consideration. The sword felt strangely warm to the touch, as if readying itself also. Arthur was not aware of the complexities within the weapon, including handprint recognition protocols and many other features which would all reveal themselves to him in the fullness of time, should he survive the testing.

The scanner revealed the inner sanctum in all its glory. Dark, dank and lit by braziers, just as a dungeon lair should be. Master Book was performing some kind of rite in the far part of the chamber, on the periphery of the TARDIS view, where the torchlight sank into the darkness. Master Bell was urging on his minions as they attempted to find a way into the timeship, without success. They had been noticed after all. So much for the element of surprise, old girl, the Doctor thought to himself. The club membership was substantial. If they had stepped outside without thinking, they would soon have been overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. By now, they were climbing all over the ship's surface, crawling over her roof. There was no danger of them forcing entry, but it irked the Doctor in any case.

'Oh, I see what you were thinking...' the Doctor said aloud, to the confusion of his two-legged companions. He skirted the console, locating a recessed switch, beneath a bubble-shaped translucent cover. Flipping it open with a thumb, he toggled the switch. Immediately, the outer plasmic shell of the TARDIS became electrified, stunning the interlopers who had dared to lay a hand upon her. Ordinarily, the feature was used to disintegrate barnacles and vortex debris when it adhered to the ship's exterior, but equally, it served the function of a bug-zapper. Those among the members who had been lucky enough to be somewhere else, broke and ran. Bell struck at those who came within reach of his grasp. There was nowhere for them to go, as the TARDIS was blocking the only means of egress from the room, so they had to be content with finding a dark corner of the room in which to huddle at this sorcerous devil's engine which frightened them even more than Master Book.

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cultists to haul Silence to his feet and hold him firmly, the better to witness the glorious and much delayed birthing of the world's new overlord. They would make a fine meal for the Candle, who would be weak after his transition.

At a word, Nash and Rysk were dragged to attention in a like manner. They struggled, but there was to be no reprieve this time; no "and with a single bound, they were free"; as the Candle stood up from his throne and loomed out of the darkness into full view, flanked by his loyal servants, their part in this was at an end.

'Grimm!' Sebastian cried, as he recognised what Bell and Book had made of his friend and protector. Amelia winced at the obscenity before them. Stripped to his undergarments, Grimm, their man of stone, looked the same as ever, and yet nothing like himself, at the same time. His oversized physique, perfect for the role of bodyguard for the Malchance family, was untouched, save for the scars of previous wars, but it was clear from the expression on his face and the soul looking out from his baby blue eyes, that Grimm was no longer in residence. From time to time, his skin would move, as though there were something inside, stretching to adjust to its new living space.

Master Bell stroked the arm of his creation, 'My brother and I owe you a great debt of gratitude, Malchance. I confess that without your assistance, we were at our wits' end. Our attempts to procure a vessel fit for our master had met with naught but ill winds. The appointed time was very nearly upon us, and we had been reduced to the necessity of dredging the streets in desperation. And then, wonderful child, you delivered into our hands a specimen of rare perfection, ideally suited for the task. Truly, we are blessed.' Master Book continued to weave the air, tweaking his spell to ensure that the body would not reject the power within. Little bubbles of flesh rose up along Grimm's arms and legs, as though they were about to erupt, but Book's sigil-writing seemed to calm them into slumber once again.

'You won't get away with this!' Sebastian shouted. 'That's our man you have there, and we *will* have him back. This is the Devil's work, and you shall burn for it.' His hand held the pistol, but his grip was weak and shaken by what he was witnessing.

The Candle took a step forward, but Master Book held him back with a warning, 'NOT READY... STILL VULNERABLE... WE SERVE...' and he stood in front of the brute, although he was a far from adequate shield, given their difference in body size. It attempted to speak, but, unused to forming human words, it could only manage a guttural gurgle.

Arthur pulled at the Doctor's sleeve, trying to attract his attention from whatever thoughts he was dwelling upon, 'Now, Merlin?'

'Not quite,' the Doctor whispered from the corner of his mouth, '*Soon*.' He did not invite further correspondence, so Arthur stood impatiently in place, awaiting the signal. He itched to enter the fray, such as it was, but if this were to be his test, he would not fail by weakening now. He noticed one of the cultists stirring behind them, and contented himself with a swift swordblow, returning the man to unconsciousness. He used the flat of his blade, as the Doctor had instructed him.

Although he did not acknowledge the action behind him, the Doctor was smiling on the inside.

Master Bell began to advance towards the interlopers, purpose in his footsteps. The Doctor looked towards Sebastian expectantly, but his hands continued to shake, and his gaze was hypnotically fixed upon the thing that was once Grimm. Bell raised up his hands, like a surgeon awaiting his gloves. He motioned as if gathering something from the air above his fingers, and formed his hands into fists, 'Now, an end to all this. Our master will have plenty of ripe meals from among the Initiated by your feet. I think we may dispense with the entrée...' Bell punched forward, as though he expected lightning to surge from his arms to strike down his foes, but nothing was forthcoming, much to his confusion.

'Ah, running a little low on power, eh? That will be the syzygy, I'm afraid. All that energy pouring into poor Grimm means there's not enough for you. Can't have it both ways!' the Doctor taunted.

'No matter. It has been too long since I dirtied my hands.' The Doctor glanced meaningfully towards Amelia, as Bell leapt at him. Jarred into action, Amelia snatched up her father's pistol from her brother's quaking hand and drew a bead on the cult master, letting off a shot with expert aim. Bell's head whipped back with the impact, a hole in his forehead to show for his bravado. He fell back onto the flagstones and lay still. Amelia covered her mouth with her hand. Although she had taken secret tuition in firearms, this was her baptism in their use against a breathing opponent. At least she assumed that the creature

she had just brought down had breathed. At this turn of events, Master Book abandoned his position before the Candle, his ritual forgotten in a moment of brotherly concern. Arthur moved to intercept, but the Doctor held him back. He nudged Sebastian, whose senses had returned with the sound of the exploding pistol shot, and he saw the fearsome mute thing gliding unnaturally towards his sister. Spurred to act, he grabbed for his cane, gripping it by the ornate handle, revealing it to be a swordstick. One of his few acquisitions from a lucky run at the cards, most thought that he carried it for mere affectation, but he was glad that he had it on this day. Casting aside his fear, he put himself between them.

The Doctor turned to Amelia, still obsessing over her last act, attempting to console her, 'You mustn't let it destroy you, child. You did what had to be done. He probably wasn't even human, as you reckon it...'

Master Bell loomed up from the floor in a fluid motion, with panther-like speed. His hands grasped out and found the Doctor's throat, squeezing for all he was worth. The hole in his forehead stared like a blind third eye, accusingly.

The Doctor struggled with the creature, fighting to pull the claw-like fingers from his throat. He could see Sebastian and Book engrossed in a contest, blade against slashing talon-like hands. Arthur attempted to come to the Doctor's aid, but his teacher rebuffed him with a foot, pushing him out and away from his struggle with the cult leader. He was bewildered at the rejection, unsure of his reason for being here, when, as yet, all he had been asked to do was wait. And then, he saw that the Doctor was not looking at Bell, but the Candle, who was standing without protection.

The Doctor attempted to speak through the choking grip, his voice rasping, 'Now... Arthur... *now*!'

'*This?* This is your salvation?' Master Bell began to chuckle at the sight before him, standing in the doorway of the sanctum. The boy was no more than a babe, despite the halo device he wore, which made his hair rise up with static electricity, like a future echo of the crown he would one day wear atop his head. He wore no armour, and his hands were open and weaponless. All he carried was a scabbard strapped onto his back; it was absurdly oversized for the boy, and stood above his head by a foot. The boy was obviously a halfwit; he had not even a sword to accompany it, and had the scabbard inverted, in any case. Master Book joined in with the laughter, his psychic merriment causing searing trauma to all present, save for his master and the boy. Silence had entrusted his clerical collar to Arthur so that he would be able to follow their lead without detection. It had taken him some time to clamber through the lower window of the 1830 Club with the heavy scabbard clamped to his back, but Arthur persevered.

The Candle pushed aside his two servants, confident in his power against such a foe. Master Book attempted to intercede, but he only served to enrage the Candle further. The brute snatched the lightweight creature that served it and hurled him against the wall.

'My... my Lord!' Bell began, but at a snarl from the Candle, he fell silent again, eyes falling upon the broken thing that was his brother, as he was left behind.

Arthur stood impassively, his tender years belying his calm demeanour. While keeping his eyes upon the Candle as it narrowed the gap between them, he gave a low bow to his waist, in honour of his foe, just as he had done at play with his dolls.

Arthur ran at the Candle without fear; his sword rose to deal as mighty a blow as he could summon.

Arthur remained bowed, and brought out a piercing warcry, using his ch'i, he ran to meet the Candle and destiny. Mocking him, the creature let out a roar of his own, bestial and threatening to bring the club down around them all. The cultists holding Silence and the others let go of their charges, in awe and fear of the thing they had signed their names to serve, but it was too late for the Malleus to intervene now. Things were beyond their control. Wheels had been set in motion and all they could do was to watch them take their own course, and send their strength to the boy, Arthur.

The sword Excalibur came crashing down upon the Candle, a blow that would have halved ten normal men, but the beast brought its hands together upon the blade as it fell, and held it fast, a mere hair's

breadth above his head. Arthur stood in disbelief. The Candle began to laugh; a pained braying that sounded more like the sawing of wood, from a throat being used with unfamiliarity.

Arthur charged straight into the outstretched arms of the Candle, in a mockery of an embrace. At the last moment, the creature swung its hands in a great clapping motion, trapping the blunt scabbard between its huge palms. It could not understand what the boy had hoped to accomplish; he had neither the strength of a man, nor even a weapon that could hope to hurt it.

As it held the metal encrusted leather sheath, and looked upon the dull metal point at the end, it felt a certain *familiarity* about the thing.

Arthur attempted to bring the sword down, but the Candle's strength was growing under the influence of the conjunction. It began to shake the sword in its grasp, trying to dislodge Arthur's grip, but he would not yield the blade. The sounds emanating from the sword stepped up in pitch and tempo, and Arthur began to sense something. The hairs on the back of his neck rose up. Was that a voice in his head?

He decided to listen to the voice.

The Candle may have had the unnatural power of an elder god, and the body of a man, but Arthur had the stubbornness of a child who was being denied his own way. He ignored the ridiculousness of his position, and continued to try to move forward against the immoveable object that was the Candle. It was belief and faith that made this world go around; something that allowed beings like the Candle their way into this plane, but it was not a one-way street. As the Candle exploited the power of the syzygy, so too did the boy, though he did not know it. The Candle took an unwilling step backwards, and then another. The touch of the scabbard was unnerving. It seemed to be increasing in temperature. The Candle felt its skin beginning to blister at its touch.

Touching a stud on the side of Excalibur's pommel, the sword responded by another change in pitch, and the activation of another of its protocols, ramping up its strength accordingly. Arthur found that he was able to lower the sword down to a position where he could put his weight behind a thrust, and the Candle found itself unable to deny him. It attempted to siphon off greater and greater energy from the syzygy, but the conjunction was waning, and the source was falling away from its grasp. Arthur advanced, finding himself able to slide the blade into the body as easily as he would one draw it from an even more unyielding place. The Candle gave full vent to his voice, a horrendous keening, part human, part something much more primal. Energy from the syzygy spilled from the wound, an undigested meal that would now never conclude.

Arthur continued to drive the scabbard onto the beast that had once been a man. A long-healed wound on its chest had reopened, and began to release fresh blood. The Candle did not have the intellect to understand its predicament, or the circumstances that led to its defeat. On some primitive level, it could not shake the single thought that this was not the way things were supposed to have gone. As the scabbard touched the wound on his belly, the scabbard flared with a brilliance that caused all the combatants in the inner sanctum to cease their struggles and shield their eyes from the glare.

The Candle found itself impaled by the shining sword/scabbard, as the syzygy passed for another two hundred years; the youth/boy exulted in his victory over the impossible. Two time periods; two conjunctions; a single location, and a single conqueror, who was two parts of a whole man, wielding two halves of the same weapon, uniting them across time and space. Sympathetic magic, coupled with the unique abilities of the device Excalibur; the effect amplified a thousandfold by the syzygy, and turned back upon the creature caught in mid-manifestation like a rabbit mesmerised by headlamps in the middle of a road.

In 1830, Sebastian and Amelia Malchance stood dumbfounded at Arthur, who stood in place exactly as he had been when he thrust the sword into his monstrous foe. When the radiance vanished, of the Candle, there was no sign. No body for the Malchances to reclaim for a proper burial. Masters Bell and Book fled the sanctum, and nobody made any attempt to stop them. Their erstwhile minions also departed, their touch of brimstone enough to keep them to the straight and narrow in the future. And the Doctor? He was smiling. Smiling, in the face of their pain.

'What is wrong with you?' Sebastian demanded of the Time Lord, 'We may have won the war, but at what cost, sir?'

The Doctor's face turned more serious. He looked Sebastian straight in the eye and placed a hand on his shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. He spoke softly, 'I am sorry for the loss of your man, but I am relieved, because things are different this time. If that *thing* had survived, it would have limped away with its servants and we would have had to go through this all yet again. You must believe me, this was for the best.'

The sword was dead in Arthur's hand, as though the battle had exhausted it temporarily. He reported the phenomena to the Doctor, but was assured that once it had been reunited with the scabbard, all would be well. As they prepared to leave the place of their bitter victory, Arthur paused to ask, 'Merlin? I thought you did say that this place was consumed by the fire?'

'Ah yes... Details, details,' he tapped at his head theatrically, 'It's all in the details.' With that, he ushered the others from the room and took up a brazier from the wall, and put a torch to the fixtures. In time, the rest of the club would be alight, and Time would be able to paper over the cracks of his interference with the minimum of disruption.

The flare of white light subsided, and as everyone else furiously blinked away the phosphor dots before their eyes, Arthur stood up straight again, to find the Candle had been transformed into a burly man in his middle years, whole and unharmed. He eyed the man suspiciously, recognising something in his appearance that looked like the Candle, but the man smiled down and winked with one of his bright blue eyes. Arthur knew that he could trust the soul who lived behind those eyes, and who was able to touch Excalibur's scabbard without flinching.

Silence came over after instructing the others to shoo away the befuddled cultists, rather than arresting them; after all, who needed the extra paperwork? He looked for Master Bell, but he and his brother's body had vanished as though they had never been there. Something to worry about for another day.

Back at the Malleus station, things were in disarray, in the aftermath of the syzygy. Addison had insisted on discharging himself at the height of the situation, when all the old Faerie Ways became active again, despite assurance from the Seelie Court that the Accords, which they had signed in good faith, would remain unchallenged. The Wild Hunt had run amok for a number of hours, playing Counting Coup with the city folk for kicks. Amanda Hopkins had had little joy from Seelie Court about the crisis. In typical politico doublespeak, they had denied any and all responsibility for the situation, and things were heading towards a diplomatic incident until Addison got Auberon on the blower and demanded that he came and picked up his kids. He threatened them with a little invasion of his own if they did not comply, and after much blustering, Auberon conceded. It may have had more to do with the promise of a drinking session between Addison and himself that had been whispered out of Titania's earshot that put the ink to the deal. Can you say whipped?

The overenthusiastic contract cleanser, Gee Hernandez turned up out of the blue to show his support, and mucked in to help, providing much needed manpower for the depleted unit. With high order spells going awry all over the country, the phone lines to the station were jammed constantly, and there was panic on the streets. The emergency services struggled to deal with situations that had come to a head because of the casual use of magic for a lot of little things. People had grown lazy, using magic for a quick fix instead of a little manual labour. Magically plugged leaks all began to spring up again at once, leaving chaos in their wake, but a sudden demand for the old fashioned kind of repairmen, long out of favour, so it was not all doom and gloom. The stock exchange crashed, after the syzygy caused the failure of some cut-price spirit harnesses that were keeping the ghosts of several

multicorporations manifest on this plane of existence, and the panic selling of shares across the board. There were rumours that some corporate sharks had merely used the disaster in order to move a rung or two up the ladder, but those allegations would have to be investigated in the months to come.

Silence and the others returned just in time to bolster forces as they dealt with another situation brought on by the syzygy. The wards on the high security cells under the station had failed, and the place was under virtual siege. Luckily, most of the highest order prisoners remained in place, thanks to the precaution of multi-level sorceries by a number of different casters, but a trio of mindwarpers had managed to slip their chains and cause havoc. With the assistance of Grimm, Silence and Rysk managed to contain the situation and restore things to normality in short order, just as the TARDIS manifested in its traditional place in the Malleus wabt.

'Too late, Doctor,' Addison crowed from his wheelchair, 'We've got everything under control here. No need for one of your patented last minute cavalry charges this time! Enjoy your holiday?'

'I've had better, Jack,' he said glumly. He had told Arthur to remain in his room, in order that he did not run into his younger self. The Doctor's mind was still on the fate of Grimm, until his eyes fell on the fellow himself, large as life and twice as ugly! 'Good lord!' Things had worked out better than he could have imagined. Obviously, the scabbard's healing properties had preserved Grimm from the destructive energy that annihilated the Candle. He went to greet him warmly, relieved beyond measure.

'You two know each other? Why does this not surprise me in the least, Doctor? Anyway, I was just about to ask Mister Grimm here if he would like to join us, in a strictly civilian capacity, of course. What do you reckon?'

'I think that would probably be a bad idea. Benjamin here is a man out of time, and if he were to remain, I think you could safely say that we'd be in for a whole heap of trouble. Besides, I happen to know that there is a couple of people who are in rather more need of his services. Isn't that right, Mister Grimm?'

'I believe so, sir,' the giant smiled, 'Are the master and mistress unharmed?'

'They will be now,' the Doctor replied, smiling back at him, 'Now, say your farewells. There's not a moment to lose. Oh, and Grimm, I have a letter for the Malchances, which is to be opened after my departure. Please ensure that they read it and act on it as soon as they can. Certainly before December comes around.'

'May I ask what the letter contains, sir?'

'Certainly. It's a letter of introduction to the Pope. I thought that it might be a nice thank you for all the beastliness I've put the three of you through.'

'By my Aunt Petunia! You *know* Pope Pius?' the manservant said incredulously.

'Well... Francesco and I are like kind of like this,' the Doctor crossed his fingers in demonstration, 'But remember... Very important that they visit before December. Now, we'd better be off.'

'You're not stopping to see them yourself, Doctor?'

'No... I've meddled in your affairs enough for one day, I think. Come on...' he said, tugging on Grimm's arm.

But as he fumbled in his voluminous coat for the TARDIS key, John Silence came running up the stairs from the cells, in a state of extreme agitation, 'Wait, Doctor! There's something you need to know...' The Doctor turned to listen, as Silence caught his breath, 'When the wards failed and the mindwarpers got loose... I think they were released by someone else. I was just checking all the seals again to make sure, and I found one of the other cells interfered with. They'd done a good job of covering it up for a cursory inspection, but there's definitely been a breach.'

'Who is it?' Addison barked at the exorcist impatiently.

The Doctor's face grew pale, and he spoke before Silence could, 'It's Koschei. He's loose.'

Oblivious to the news of Councillor Varga's arrest, Mary Brookes forced herself to put on her make-up and eveningwear – nothing too provocative – and honour the compact she had made with her employer that morning by telephone.

The thought of his oily touch made her skin crawl, but he had as good as threatened her with dismissal if she refused.

Since she had taken the position, Varga had shown unwelcome attention to her, but in recent days,

it had gone beyond the common-or-garden sexual harassment in the workplace stuff; the intensity of his gaze gave her a terrible feeling of foreboding. Every time the councillor's head popped through his office door, she felt an instinctive urge to flee.

The final straw had been the telephone call she fielded the day before, from the policeman. For some reason, when she transferred the call to Varga, she did not break the connection, and continued to eavesdrop. The accusation the officer levelled at her employer, instead of seeming like the sick fantasy he dismissed it as, sounded all too plausible to her; she ripped the headset off, and flung it as far from herself as she could, before bolting to the toilet in distress.

Later, she would blame it on a sudden migraine. Varga seemed to be genuinely concerned for her welfare, and sent her home early. He said that they had a busy day ahead of them, in a manner that sounded completely normal, but still managed to add to her feeling of dread.

As it turned out, going home was the worst thing that she could have done, because it gave her time to dwell on every word, going over and over it in her head, reading all kinds of veiled meanings into it, buried beneath a thin veneer of normalcy.

That was why she had called in sick that morning. Luckily, Simone had fielded the call, and she was able to avoid speaking to *him*. Little did she know that he would ring back just before lunch. Her heart beat so fast that she could no longer recall the details of their conversation, except for her passive agreement to meet at a wine bar after Varga left work, in order to straighten things out. At least it was a public place, which gave her a measure of confidence.

As she tried to calm her last-minute nerves, she heard the horn of destiny. Her taxi driver gave another blast for good measure.

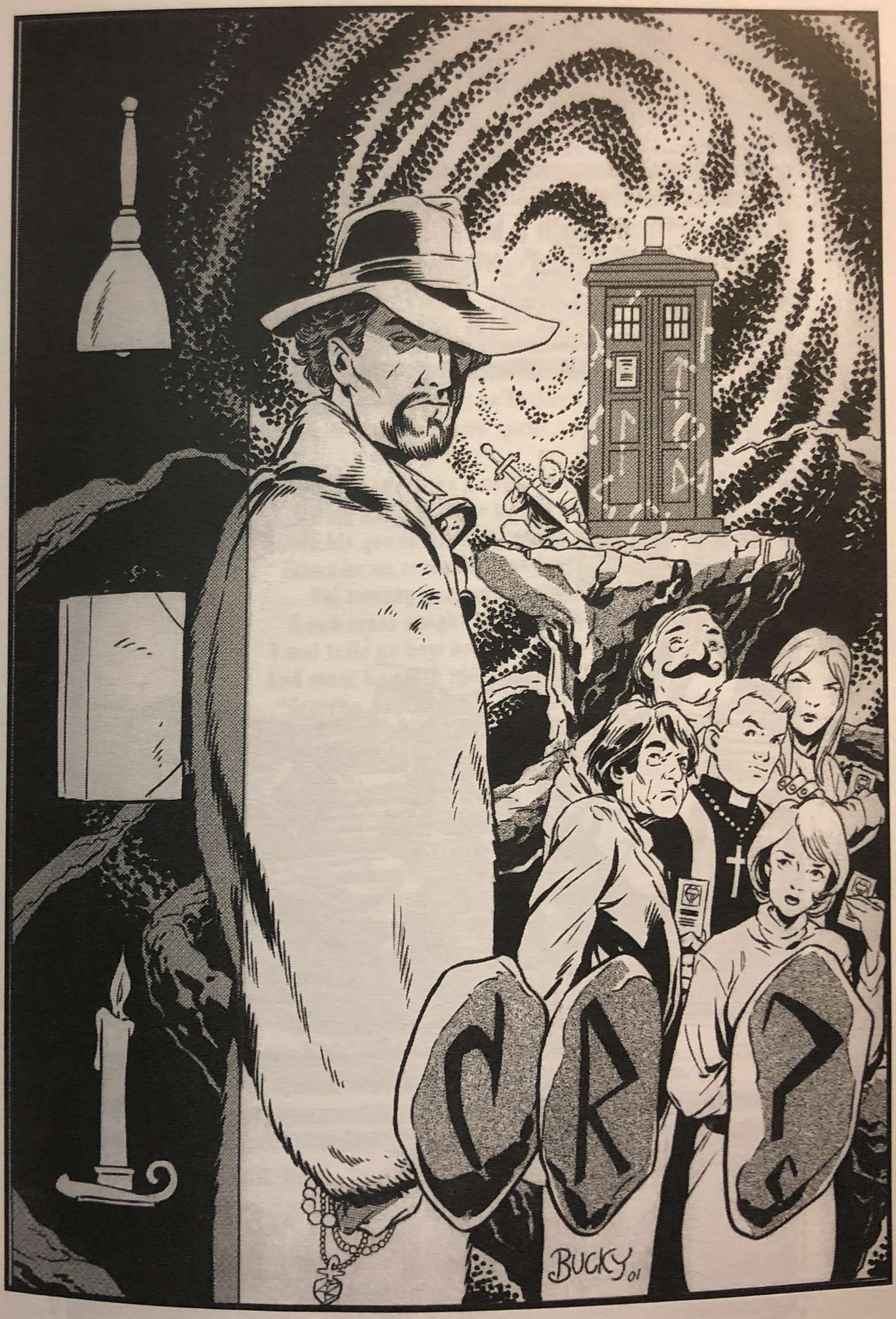
Five minutes after she left her flat, the phone rang. Natalie Gordons left a brief message, asking her to get in contact with the Victim Support Department, trying to circumvent the shock Mary would receive upon her return to work otherwise. Gordons' voice was light and airy, in order to avoid worrying Mary unduly.

Twenty-one minutes after she left her flat, Mary arrived at the Casa Perdita, the dirty little Mexican themed bar-cum-meat market that Varga had indicated. At least there were plenty of people there, but no sign of the councilman.

Forty-eight minutes after she left her flat, Mary checked her watch, for the fifth time that minute. The little creep had stood her up. A small part of her smarted at the snub, but the rest felt only relief. She decided that she should walk home, to allow the alcoholic Dutch courage she had consumed to pass from her system. Reaching for the door handle, she was confused to find it receding away from her, as a man outside opened the door. She smelt his earthy animalistic musk before she saw him, with his immaculate goatee and eyes like smouldering coals that seemed to swallow her up completely. It took her a few moments to process the information that they were blocking the entrance to the bar. She apologised, and he smiled. Smiled like a tiger…

An hour and ten minutes after she left her flat, the screaming started.

If Time was of a mind, on occasion, to choose a champion, might that not breed jealousy among the other Powers? If this is true, then it is not beyond the realms of possibility that perhaps Fate might decide to recruit an agent of its own. Someone who might be strong enough to make right what once went wrong, from its perspective. The Malleus had used their Art to discern the tapestry of predestination and unpick a thread or two, reworking it to their own purpose. Perhaps Fate had finally taken notice and decided that enough was enough. Or perhaps not…


CRY
BUCKY 01

Foule Deeth

by Nick Lancaster

Prologue

Herkneth, I wol tell ye talis
About a knighte of Arthur's palace.
'Tis ne a tale of chivalrye,
Knightes ne do fight for hir countrye,
This tale's of a matere secree
That men ne speke of to this dey:
Swich peyne it caus'd to Arthur's men
They vow'd to namore speke again.

My tale concernes a noble knight,
For King and countrye he did fight.
And his goode life did sudden end
Whan he on secree busines wend.
Ful twenty yeer ago died he
A red-cross knight in chivachye.
I wol telle ye how he met his death,
And what he saith in his last breath:
"Certeyn, the beest is one of many
That serchen kingdoms neeth the see."
I fear that he was wood: forsooth,
In what he saith there is no truth.
I wol telle ye now what he toold me:
What yvel beestes he dyd se,
Ayeyns hem dyd he fight in ydel
For ne man mighte sley swich yvel.
He toold his tale bifor he died,
For was I stonding at hys side.
He bade me his tale to wreten
So his deeth ne'er will be foryeten,
And sholde I die befor I telle
My soul shalle be condemn'd to Helle.

The foule deeth of Sir Abslom

Though he liv'd only a litel wight
He was a gentil, parfit knight.
Chivalrous to all he did se
As Arthur's knightes sholde be
His hors was alway ful buxom
This knight was cleped Sir Abslom.
And whan and where this knight did ride
He hadde thre squires at his side.
Oft he fought in distant lands,
Where beests did dwell beneeth the sands.
And ne man kan wher these lands are:
For ne man e'er did go so far
Save Sir Abslom, and ne for winn:
He went for Arthur and Merlin.

Altho he was kan'd for to rome
He mette his deeth ne far from home:
He on a visitacioun went
To Farrenbro, a towne in Kent.
And with him were his squires thre
Who had thilke fate as he.
And eek nere by were five more men
Sent by Morgaine to him spyen.
Thise men I thinke deyde withal:
They ne retourned to Morgaine's hall.

The wit they went to farrenbro
Was a golden chalice, lang ago
Ygraven in a box of tree
In a sepulcre, for suretee:
For 'tis sayd that whan the cup is held
He who it wieldeth shal ne're breath yeld
And shal have hapinesse eterne:
A lust of which wights al meten.
This cup did Arthur wishe to welde
Bifor his tyme did come to yelde.
But Abslom als the cup ysoght
For in his life he wish'd for noght
But to bryng bak his loste love:
She dwelles now in heven above.

Whan they arriv'd in Farrenbro,
They hadden no wit wheer to go
They axen the wey of knightes tweyne -
Thise knightes a-werken for Morgaine!

Whan Sir Abslom did find the place
Where serchen the beest with foule face,
He bade his squires stay behind,
So they did wait: they did ne mind.
They were releev'd to ne go in:
The sepulcre was dark within,

Morgaine's knightes did follow eek:
They hadde been waiting for a weeke
For Arthur's knightes to find the tomb,
So they did follow Sir Abslom.
They heled hem whan he saugh the beest
He did ne se them in his heest.
Hir plan was swich as I mighte telle:
They wold avoide the feend from Hell,
And leeve Sir Abslom to retreeve
The chalice, than they mighte acheeve
To taak the cuppe from Sir Abslom,
And then mighte they retourne home
And mordre Sir Abslom forsooth.
I swere by fey that is the trooth.

The sepulcre was darke and coolde,
And filled with corpses deed and oold.
The savour was thilke oon as deeth
Sir Abslom kan ne what he seeth,
Swich was the darke within that tomb.
He hadde to stoope, ther was ne room
To stande tall and stronge like a knighte shoolte.
But what Sir Abslom saugh was boote:
A litel way away, forsooth,
A hole was ther upon the roof:
This hole led to a chamber hygher
So Abslom cryed oot to his squires,
"Y-fere we shall explore this toomb:
I nam but lorn upon myne oon."
His squires did follow him, certeyn,
But als the knightes of Morgaine!

Whan they did reech the chamber hygh,
They climb'd til they had touch'd the skye
And they mighte climb namore:
But still the chalice they ne saugh.
Oon squire seyde "We shalle not finde
This chalice if we stay'd behind
For all the nighte and til the morwe,
And look'd til al our yen were sorwe."

But then Sir Abslom hered a yelle:
The seconde squire did him telle,
"I her have founde an oolde book,
Prayhaps it wol tell were to look,
And were to find the chalice goold."
So Sir Abslom took the book oold
And open'd it and try'd to reed
But this were ne a simple deed,
For th' book were in olde English wrot
And what it were he mighte telle not.
He tourned to his squires thre
And sayd "In this auctoritee,
I kan ne what the wordes sey
But I shall speke them any wey."
So he did reed from th'oolde book,
Til the firste squire cryed out "look!"
And in thilke moment, he mighte tell,
He had summon'd a beest from Hell.

Full greene it was, with legges many,
A fouler feend ye ne'er mighte se.
It hadden body wormen-like
But armes eek with which to strike.
His yen reed were like rychest clothe
They swal large for he was ful wrothe.
The frygh ye get if ye him se
Will make ye eld in seconds wisly:
Whan they did se him - oh the fright!
Hir heres black did turn full white.
The sepulcre where he did dwell
Did sicken hem with its foule smell
And made them wol to fle the place.
Oon squire did look up at the face,
Then was he yfallen on the floor:
The beest had struck, he was ne more.
And whan the foul beest's deed was done,
It tourned back to Sir Abslom.
Than Sir Abslom beshrewed the feend:
The squire was a verray freend
That Sir Abslom had lov'd for yeers.
At that the knight wept biter teers.
Agast, oon squire cryed "By good!"
The savour foule had made him wood
I woot he was not wood for lang:
Upon the beest's legge he did hang.
And whan the squire was dead for sure,
The beest did droppe him on the floor
Where then he sank down in the mud
His body was than goon for good.

Tweyne squires downe, and oon to go:
With wrothe the beest did seem to gro.
And whan he kan his felaws were dead,
The third squire tourned, and he fled.
He did not e'en get to the door
Afore his body hit the floor:
The beest had kiked him in the back,
And whan he fell his nekk did crack.

E'en thogh his freends were lying deed,
Sir Abslom did not tourne his heed.
He thought that he mighte get the prize
And have hapinesse in this wise:
The squires would be dead ne more
So Sir Abslom would feele ne sore.
And then with hapiness eterne,
He would to Camelot returne.

Than Morgaine's men did fight the beest,
And on hir bodyes it did feest:
Hir tormentrie was e'en worse:
The beest had woken from hir curse.
And so it wreke hir blasphemie
By killing hem with sojournie.
And whan they songen "weilaway"
The beest did cry in jolitee!
The beest was esed whan it was done.

But what became of Sir Abslom?
He did retourne to Arthur's hall
But did ne reach the castle wall:
He deyd afore he made it home,
Ne'er again to fight or rome.
I was with him whan he deyd

And Merlin, Arthur and his breyd.
So bloodye was he that Arthur's bride
Did tourne and run to get inside
For she was sikkened by his state
And did ne wol to here his fate.
Sir Abslom toold us what bifel;
He toold us of the feend from Hell.
He toold us how the squires were dead
And how he wol he had deyd in stead.

Than Merlyn toold us of the beest:
That it hadde men to do it's heest;
And now the squires were thise men
So in a way they liv'd again.
He toold us al that we mighte kan
The beeste was from erthe befor man.
For twenty-seven centurye
The beest had serchen neeth the see
And now the beest was come ashore
Ne man was sauf from deeth or sore.
He sayd he saw the beest yrisen
With thonder-clappe and fiery leven
That scorch'd the land and brenned the aire.

Than Sir Abslom made Merlyn swere
To kill the beest and him ygrave
Than Merlin quod "I already have.
'Twas yesterday, to-day, to-morn,
Or twelf-month afor ye were borne."
I kan Merlyn is nelike al men
For he mighte live bothe now and then
And eek a time in yeers to passe:
He has a magick boxe of brass
In whiche he travelles ther he can.
And he has witing beyonde man.
He was ywroght afore myne birthe
I thinke that he is ne from erthe.

Than Sir Abslom did ceese to breethe
And was his life so robb'd by Deethe.
King Arthur quod with honde on cheste,
"Of al myne knights was he the hyeste."

How Merlin kill'd the beest

Whan Merlin heered Sir Abslom's words
He ne mighte beleeve what he'd hered.
He vow'd that he wold kill the beest.
Twel-fmonth and oon day pass'd at least
Than Merlin wend to Farrenbro,
Within a moment he did go,
And in this litel town of Kent,
He arriv'd afore he e'en hadde went!

His boxe appeared in side the tomb
Where this foule beest did make it's home.
And eek he founde the oolde booke,
He tourned the leefs and hadde a looke.
He than piteed poor Sir Abslom:
For 'twas the Necronomicon!

Merlin kan what he muste do,
By feyth, to kill the beeste shrew,
He muste reed from this cursed tome,
That caus'd the deeth of Sir Abslom.
And than he would call uppe the beest,
And those thre men that do his heest,
And Merlin mighte deel with these men,
That he mighte make hem live again
If they did tourn against this thinge
That keep'd hem trapp'd here with his winge.
Than if they help'd the feend to kill,
Merlin mighte take away hir ill.

And whan the thre men did appeer,
Merlin ne was fill'd with feer.
He spek'd with calm and plesant voice,
And whan they hered they did rejoice.
"By God!" said oon, "I will be free,
And ne stay here eternelly!"
So Merlin's plan was a-werken welle,
But wherein was the beeste from Helle?
He tourned his yen backe to the book,
And kan afore he e'en did look,
The book was ne compleet - a page
Was missing, Merlin cryed with rage.
He thoght Sir Abslom had the leef,
And he beshrewed the litel theef.
Than wend he to his magic boxe.
He hadde to open many lockes,
And whan the door did open wide,

The squires saugh what was inside:
Merlin's magic box, 'tis seyd,
Is ne like any box man made,
For whan the doors do open out,
'Tis bigger within than without!

The squires follow'd Merlin in,
The magic box was brighte within,
And magic lamps did lite the wey
To Merlin's wondrous librarey.
Therein he founde the what he did seeke,
And many other grimoires, eek.
He took the Necronomicon,
Founde the page which Sir Abslom
Had taken, then he seyd the spell,
And summon'd uppe the beest from Hell!

The beest did roar, and nash its teeth,
But namore mighte it cause his deeth,
For Merlin's box hadde magic poors,
Ye kan ne kill within its doors.
And if ye try a man to smite
The hurt comes back, with thries the mite!
And what it did, the beest ne ken,
Until it burste its owen yen!

Than Merlin ledde him to a room,
And lock'd him in there on his oon.
Then whan he had done that, I swere,
He made the whole room disapeer!

"Where is he gone?" Oon squire seyde,
And Merlin quod "The beest is deyde.
He is in space from whence he came,
And Hath N'Shogga was his name.
I thought that I hadde kill'd the shrewe,
But now I see that ne is trewe:
Ye were his minions on erthe,
And now ye haf a seconde birthe,
I pray ye live your new lifes well,
And ne'er again haf cas with Hell."

Than Merlin's box did take them home,
And they arriv'd afore they'd gone.
And they did have a mirie feest
For Merlin hadde killed the foule beest,
And now good England was sauf and sonde,
With thonks to Merlin's magic honde.

Now yeers have pass'd and I am oold
I thinke about the chalice goold.
What I wol give for hapinesse
To live eterne with no distresse.
For Merlyn lives eternally:
He was borne long befor me
And he wolt live when I have gone.

I also thinke of Sir Abslom:
I wol to kan what bifel him
Whan all the squires had mordred been.
I kan that he did reach the palace
But ne if he did find the chalice
And now he is ygraved beneeth,
Prayhaps his hapinesse is deeth
For he is now in heven above
Eterne with Taiyin, his loste love.

Thorns

by Helen Fayle

My memory Metamorphosized
Standing in thorns and fire
Porcelain dream suicide...
"Bleeding Roses" Tito and Tarantula

Beltaine Eve, Gwynned

'Sssh, beloved.' Her grandmother leans over her mother's head, cradles it in her lap, kisses the crown. Her mother is weeping.

Her mother never weeps.

Lord Uthyr lies, unmoving, on the far side of the room, a crumpled, naked figure, no longer the powerful warlord. Not here. Not in *her* presence. Not in the presence of the Queen of Winter, come too late to save a daughter.

Not dead. Not yet. But only because she has his victim to comfort.

Warlord.

Rapist.

Viviane draws the covers of the bed over Ygraine's bruised body. Ygraine, Lady of High Tagel until tonight, clings to her mother; continues to cling to her, ever tighter, enough to hurt. Seeking shelter.

Too late: it had always been too late.

Viviane's hand strokes the auburn hair, her fingers drifting soothingly through the soft curls.

The child stands in the corner. The only sounds in the room are her breathing, as she tries desperately not to cry, and the pained grunts from Uthyr

rapist

and Ygraine's sobs, now harsh and strained.

And a footfall, light as air, heavy as time.

Cold, cold the heart that knows only betrayal and pain. As cold as the ice plains of Breceliande.

The Queen of Winter is the first to break the silence.

'Merlin.' The name is spat from her lips as a curse.

'Viviane. Lady – I swear to you –'

The Lady raises her head, looks him in the eyes. Blue looking into a shifting blue/green/grey. A young/old face topped with straggling red hair. A beak of a nose. She brushes her hair out of her face, ice blond strands falling through nerveless fingers.

'Swear what, Merlin? That this was none of your doing? That you did not encourage Uthyr to this act? To the murder of Gorlois?'

He looks sad, but resolute. 'To take what was destined, yes. But not like this...'

'Destiny!' She cradles Ygraine closer. *'This* is your "destiny" Merlin. A reign started with murder, lies and rape. Is this the brave new world you offer?'

He makes as if to approach, a hand offered in conciliation, but she hisses at him, muttering a small incantation under her breath. He backs away as the air between them solidifies, keeps his distance from the barrier she has placed between them. His lined face takes on a sadder air, if such is possible.

The Lady of the Lake remains unmoved.

Colder. As befitted the ruler of Breceliande and its forests of ice.

'I never knew, until this night, what the nature of your hatred for me was, Lady.' His voice is softer. Almost, not quite, reminiscent of other times, other places.

Viviane stands, helping Ygraine, shaking, compliant, to her feet. Supporting her at her side.

Cold, colder, coldest: the Ice Queen now in truth.
'Hear me, Merlin.' She speaks to the other as well, the warlord
rapist
murderer
usurper
now standing unsteadily at his side, fair hair sweat dampened, lust sated.
'You will reap the consequences of this night, I swear. Breceliande will not stand to see one its own treated so. *I* will not stand to see one of my own treated so. Breceliande withdraws its support from Uthyr and the Alliance of Worlds for this.'
'Eachtar speaks for Breceliande, witch!' Uthyr spits.
Viviane turns her head, only slightly, and holds his gaze with her own.
Lifetimes pass in the depths of such gazes.
The warlord looks away first, and flushes.
Shame?
Good.
'Eachtar speaks when *I* will it, Pendragon. Now be silent, your master is the one I address.' Her eyes meet the prophet's; meet, and hold. 'Use your pawns, Merlin. But know that I *will* oppose you from this night onwards. And there will come a day when you will be in my power. On that day, you will understand exactly what it is you set in motion this night, with this act.'
He does not back down. He would not. Could not. Their roles in this had been written long before any of them had even taken their first breaths.

'I will claim what is mine, Viviane.' His voice is as cold and clear as her own. She knows he speaks truly. For him, it is the past. A fate accomplished.

The Queen of Winter nods. Bows. Behind the Queen, the child sees the arrival of the *other*, the third part of the trinity, come Taking her daughter Viviane steps backwards – to Merlin's sight and Uthyr's, into *nothing*. The *third* envelopes them, vanishes from High Tagel with a sigh, a breeze brushing past Merlin's cheek, a promise.
An icy chill, lancing, deep. Bone deep.
A promise...
It's only then that Merlin turns, and sees the little girl watching them from the doorway, her face pale and drawn under a cascade of red curls, green eyes staring at him – no, at Uthyr, in fear and loathing.
Only then does he realise the *why*.

Tomorrow, Sometime

She's lying in a bed, in a room not too different from her cell. The same off-white plastered walls, cracked and worn even though the building isn't that old. (It was new when they first brought her here.) But here, at least, there are sounds other than the guards walking up and down the corridor outside, or the ticking of a clock. Except that these new sounds are the steady drip of the fluids hanging in limp plastic bags from the stand at her side, and the persistent periodic beeps from the machines that they use to monitor her failing body.
They'd permitted her son to visit, for the first time in years. But she had turned away from him when he sat beside her, not wanting to look upon his face. And so he had left, with so much still unsaid.
So unlike his father. Dark, where Arthur had been fair.
He had burned like starfire. Yet her son was as a blackened ember. Not even half the man his father had been.
Mordred reminded her, she saw now, of her own father: Gorlois of High Tagel. Gorlois, raven haired, dark skinned. Who'd played with her and her sisters in front of the great hearth in the hall, letting them climb all over his back and pretend to pony-ride him across the *srela*-fur rugs.

'I don't know that I should let you in,' a woman's voice was saying. She turns her head, fighting the weakness that has spread bone-deep now through her body.
Breaking down,' they whisper, when they think that she cannot overhear. Whatever kept her immortal all those years just isn't working anymore.

Because I don't want it to, she could have told them, had they asked. Had she cared. But they didn't, and she didn't, and so silence held sway.

'Just a few minutes,'

A man's voice. Young, soft, gentle. She recognises an echo of something familiar in the tones.

'Let him approach.' Her voice, so long unused, is a raven's harsh croak in her own ears.

'Five minutes, no more,' the nurse warns. She closes the door behind her, careful to leave a gap. Two inches; no more, no less.

A footfall: light as air, heavy as time.

The man sits in the chair at the side of the bed, and places a bundle of white and red roses at her side, within reach of her hands. Fresh cut, she can just faintly catch the scent of the flowers over the ever-present smell of antiseptic and the sickly sweet stench of decay it masks.

'Hello, Morgaine.'

'Merlin?' she asks, thinking she sees something in his eyes: blue/green, this time; set in a face neither young nor old and framed by long brown hair, that curls down to his shoulders, brushing dark brown velvet.

'Not exactly,' he replies.

His hand reaches out, brushes hair off her face - grey now, not the red it had once been. She notices that his shadow, cast by the light from the window, is making finger-shadows on the wall. 'I came to say goodbye,' he says simply.

'To gloat,' she rasps. Her hand, withered, age-spotted, veins so denuded that the needles they put into her seem to stand out as much as her tendons, grasps the roses at her side, clenches into a fist.

She feels the pricking in her palm, as a thorn pierces her skin. But she's used to that, with their barbaric medical practices.

And she remembers...

Midwinter, Brecelíande

There is a great difference between *knowing* the path the future will take, and walking it. Perhaps no one has ever known that more clearly than the man who stands on the balcony of the High Castle, waiting to make his entrance.

Perhaps two others. One man that this one will never know. The other is the woman who awaits his arrival, inside.

A high pitched, long drawn out sobbing cry splits the still, frigid night air.

A woman's voice. Followed by the wail of a newborn child. He moves towards the open window, into the antechamber beyond, careful to close the heavy window behind him. Finally, the time long awaited has arrived.

If he grieves for the path taken to reach this point, he never shows it.

Viviane meets him at the door to the bedchamber, an outstretched hand barring his passage. The other arm cradles a thickly wrapped bundle that squirms in her grasp. His fingers catch ice blond hair as he takes the child from her, and she pulls away, unwilling to make contact.

For some unknown reason, this hurts him more deeply than it should. This woman has, after all, been his sworn enemy for years, from his perspective. He still doesn't know why. One day, a long time in his past/her future, they will be bound to a common purpose, but for now, for her, the wounds are too fresh.

'*What will I do to you, for you to hate me so?*' His thought remains unspoken.

The child now in his arms squirms and cries, searching for the warmth, comfort and food he cannot provide.

'A boy,' Viviane of Brecelíande, Lady of the Ice Lakes, tells him.

'I know,' he whispers. 'And Ygraine –'

'Tell Uthyr, he can have the child. Ygraine wants no part of him. Or of his father.'

'She should be his queen.' Merlin says sadly. Viviane shakes her head.

'We should not be enemies, thee and I,' he says, softly. The look she gives him is cold, remote, yet strangely vulnerable. He cannot shake the feeling that he knows her, somehow. In all the years he has known this woman, this is a feeling he has never had, this familiarity. Perhaps because now, at this point, their enmity, so new woven, has not yet built up a barrier between them?

'You have what you came for, Merlin. Your welcome in my kingdom is over.'

The moment passes. He nods sadly, and turns to leave, feeling his transportation awaiting him outside the fortress, unwillling for some reason to enter. No matter, he can go to her.

A small figure comes into his field of vision; a little girl, no more than six or seven years old. Red-haired, green eyed. She stands in the doorway, and stares at him, raw hatred in her eyes.

Not knowing what to say he settles for a simple 'Hello.'

She stares at the small bundle in his arms, then up at him.

'You're taking my brother away,' she says, accusingly.

'Yes.' Is all he can think of to say. *Which child would this be of Ygraine and Gorlois? The eldest, Morgaine?*

Of course, Morgaine...

So this, too, was inevitable.

How much more pain, to bring about the events he has lived through...?

'I hate you!' she shouts, and runs to Viviane – for solace, he thinks. Then she strikes at the Queen of Winter with her small fists. 'I hate you too!' she sobs, and runs away, crying.

He sees Viviane bow her head in pain, and for a moment, considers offering a small comfort.

But no... what comfort can he offer? He already knows how this will end.

The boy in his arms stirs and cries, and Merlin makes his way out of the Fortress of Ice. Outside, a dragon awaits.

Tomorrow, Again

'I hated you for so long,' she whispers. He nods. 'You think you understand?' she asks. The effort of talking makes her cough, and he offers her a glass of water, holding it to her lips for her to drink.

One time, she would have had him killed for his presumption, but now, she lets it pass. What does it matter, now?

'I think I understand,' he says, eventually.

'Do you?' There's more bitterness in her voice than she'd planned. With her free hand she reaches for, and takes hold of his. She closes long fingers over his, letting him feel her nails dig into his flesh. He doesn't make a sound. 'Let me show you...'

Convulsively, her other hand tightens around the roses, and she feels the soft touch of crushed petals graze her skin, and the sharp touch of the thorns piercing her thumb.

The Forest of Selladon, Brecelíande, Midsummer

She's unbound her hair, now that she's shaken off her chaperone for the afternoon. Alone in the woods, her horse tethered near the stream, she shakes out her waist length hair and dances, delighting in the feel of the sun on her skin, and in the way her hair catches the light and shines with its own, like a fire. And so caught up in the dance is she, that she doesn't see him perched high up in the tree until it is too late.

'Are you supposed to be here?'

She stops, startled, and looks around. Finally she sees the branch sway, as if under a great weight, and she looks up. And there he sits, as bold as brass, staring at her.

'Are you?' she asks, letting her hand drop to the blaster at her waist.

'Of course.' He swings down and drops, landing lightly on his feet in front of her. 'My father rules this land. I'm Arthur, son of Eachtar.' He bows. 'And you are the most beautiful woman I've ever set eyes on, my lady.'

He's younger than her, but by how much she struggles to say. Not much more than a boy. And she feels herself too old and too worldly to fall prey to stripling flattery.

Although he *is* handsome, she admits.

'I am Morgaine, of Breceliande. My grandmother is your father's overlord.' She holds her head up proudly, expecting him to realise his presumption, but instead he laughs.

'Then we are kin - of a kind. My half-brother Kai would be your half brother!'

'I'm here to visit,' she offers eventually, his good mood impossible to be unmoved by. 'But I do not recall seeing you last night at dinner,' she continued. He takes her hand, and to her surprise, she lets him.

'I have been with my tutor. I only got back this morning. I wanted some time to myself, which was why I came here.'

'To sit in trees?' she teases.

'You may laugh, my lady, but you see some wonderful sights whilst perched so high...' He laughs again. 'Come, let me show you.'

She wants to protest, to complain that she's too old to climb trees like a boy: she's a woman now, a squire, and soon to be a knight. Except...

...it's a beautiful day, and he shines like the sun, even under the canopy of the forest, his hair dappled by the light falling through the shading leaves...

He has to be younger than her, far too young for her to even notice, normally.

...but his smile is all for her, and Breceliande is such a cold place, even in the Summer Country. And her grandmother's home is the coldest of all, and she's been so lonely...

...granddaughter of the Lady of the Lake, she has it all.

And has nothing.

She climbs...

Tomorrow, Later

It's a small magic, this thing she does, but even this is painful, now.

He has his eyes closed, and his youthful face bears an expression of pain, and sorrow. When he opens them again, she sees sympathy in those grey/green depths.

'You're weak, this time, Merlin,' she tells him. He shrugs.

'That's a matter of opinion.'

She's not so close to her end that she cannot see what he tries to hide. Pain, fear, weariness. A catalogue of sorrow, loss and regret, writ large in this face as in none of the others she remembers.

'What do you want? I grow weary,' she snaps.

'Just to say goodbye, I suppose. Or maybe "hello".'

She laughs again. 'Never a straight answer. Always riddles and portents. One day that will catch up with you, Doctor.'

'One day, perhaps.' He smiles. 'Not today, however.'

'No.'

The silence that follows is awkward, and she watches as he fiddles with the chain of a watch-fob. Watches, and waits. *She* has no need to worry about the silence. She's already a part of it.

He still fights it.

She sees it in his eyes.

She laughs, and he startles at the sound, which despite her best intentions still decays into a harsh croak.

'If not today,' she says, labouring now to get the precious air into her lungs, 'then when?'

He doesn't meet her eyes. A pity. She'd expected more of him, even now.

Withered, age spotted, slack skinned hands clutch the stems of the flowers. Petals fall to the white linen sheets: soft velvet drops of blood. The thorns drive deeper into her palms, and she feels the warm, sluggish trickle of her own blood run down through a clenched fist, down the dark green stems, to fall alongside the rose petals.

Blood to blood.

Mount Badon, Spring, Seven years later

It is the scents of battle she hates most: the sharp tang in the air of ozone, in the aftermath of the ion cannons barrages. Of the pulse rifles, casings heated almost to melting point. Of charred flesh, of the coppery scent of blood, the acidic odour of bile from belly wounds. The musty smells of urine, and shit, and mud.

The mud... everything came down to that at last. Red earth made redder by the blood of the fallen. Theirs and hers.

She dismounts on the crest of the hill, overlooking the devastation below. Farmland and meadow, this had been only this morning. Now a blasted wasteland, where nothing would grow for at least a generation.

The sunset trickles across the landscape, pooling across the land casting a bloody glow across an already bloody scene.

The cybrorse at her side snorts, and paws the ground, already ploughed deep by the thunder of the cavalry charge earlier. She strokes its nose absently, enjoying the feel of the silky smooth artificial skin that covers its huge frame.

She hates the aftermath of battle, but she loves the melee. Already she misses the fight. But it is over, now. Her rose and hydra banner flies from the centre of the plain, with Arthur's red dragon standard beside it. The S'rax and the Red Dragon Knights have fought side by side this day, and emerged victorious.

And Arthur… Arthur, by the time the sun has finally set, will be High King.

'A crown for your thoughts.'

His voice. His beloved hands on her shoulders, felt even through her armour. She turns, smiles, a radiant smile reserved for him. Only for him.

'They are not worth nearly so much.' She bows. 'My liege.'

His hands raise her. 'Not you. Never you, my love.' He kisses her, exuberantly despite the fatigue of battle. 'We should go. They are waiting for us.'

The sound of *something* torn asunder disturbs the ravens circling over the battlefield, and they wheel away en masse, taking refuge in the woods nearby. She half-recognises the sound, and with Arthur turns to see its source:

A sense of blue. An image, overlaid for an instant, of a large box, which hides *something else*: An impression of vastness, older than the stars, deeper than the farthest reaches of Annwn. And a man steps away from the *thing* that folds back upon itself just enough to be present.

She knows him. He was older, then. Red haired, with a beak of a nose.

'Merlin - by all the gods you come too late!' Arthur runs forward, embraces his tutor. Morgaine stands back, her hand resting on her powersword, already half-unsheathed.

'I hope not, dear boy. I wouldn't miss your coronation, now would I?' His face is creased into a beaming smile - until his eyes see Morgaine. He steps back, his face shuttered, wary, but not before she sees the look of sorrow that crosses it when he looks back at his former pupil.

'Oh Arthur…'

His sigh could have made a stone weep.

Yet it cannot touch the ice that is in her heart when she looks at him.

'Merlin? This is Morgaine, my second.' Arthur, unseeing of his tutor's sudden change of demeanour, tries to introduce them.

'We've met.' She says, coldly.

'Yes my dear, I rather think we have.' Merlin's voice is carefully neutral. 'Arthur, there is something we should discuss. In private,' he adds, with a pointed look at Morgaine.

'I have no secrets from her,' Arthur says, taking her hand. Filled with a sudden sense of unease, she pulls away.

'No my boy, perhaps not, except for the one you do not even know you keep.'

Arthur laughs. 'You speak in riddles, old friend. What could be so painful that you seek to break it so?'

Merlin looks at Morgaine, meets her eyes, and for a moment she feels as though he sees her soul. In that moment, she knows, and could curse the gift of sight that brings memory and foreknowledge together: here, now.

She remembers a midwinter night, so long ago.

The words he speaks to Arthur are lost to her, as she stands there, in the dying rays of the sun. She watches it seems from a great distance as he pronounces her doom. Watches as Arthur's eyes widen in shock, then horror, at what they have been, what they have done.

It doesn't matter she wants to scream. There's a sharp scent of bile, and it's her, her, on her knees in the mud. *It doesn't matter.*

Except that it does. For a man who would be king.

And he's at her side, one hand reaching out as if to help her stand, but pulled back at the last, still half-extended, afraid to touch, afraid to hurt by not touching.

The ice in her heart grows just a little bit more.

Tomorrow

He's staring at her hand, but makes no move towards her. He simply makes an impotent gesture with one hand.

'That must hurt.'

'No more than do the memories I bear. Twelve hundred years of them, yet the oldest are still the most painful.' She clutches the stems harder.

'Immortality,' he says, 'is never easy. Even after a thousand years.' She thinks for one moment that he means to say more, but he doesn't.

'Words,' she tells him. Although weak, she manages to raise her bloodied hand, the roses still held tight. 'Nothing but words. Is that all there is left of you?' The hand falls back to the bed, to lie on warm blood and soft petals and cold linen. 'You were more than that, once. Now - you are even more hollow than I.' Another racking cough, that leaves her exhausted. The nurse puts her head around the door, but she waves the woman off impatiently. 'Shadows and dust, these are what define you now, *Doctor.*'

This, at least, stings him. She sees the sudden hurt in his eyes.

'And what defines you, Morgaine - the Undying, finally ending. The Rose of Hell, fading on the vine?' How easy, she thinks, he still is to provoke. Maybe there is still a fire in him, somewhere.

'Hatred. Anger. Revenge,' she tells him.

And lies in the telling.

Samhain Eve, High Tagel, Fifteen Years later

A cold wind blows tonight, through the corridors of the castle. The tall woman in the grey armour strides towards the council chamber and pulls her *verrin*-lined cloak tightly around her, a vain attempt to keep out the chill.

She should not be here, not so soon. But summoned, she came. She dared not do otherwise.

Her King awaits.

He sits alone in the chamber, in the seat closest to the hearth, yet otherwise no different from the others that surround the massive girth of the table that all but fills this great hall. Unbidden, she lays her hand upon the smooth surface of the round table, feeling the pulse of the World Tree

Yggdrasil... heart of the world...

whose mighty bough this is.

At least, she had thought he was alone. There was another in the room.

Her.

Guenevere. It takes an effort to smooth her features into a semblance of a smile, from the snarl that is her first response. For his sake, she does it.

'My liege.' She takes refuge in formality. Bows, still somewhat awkwardly. He knows of the wounds and so assays a rueful look of understanding before accepting her homage.

Yet only a few days before he *had knelt to* her...

'Commander.'

In the firelight, his golden hair seems made of flame.

'You summoned me away at a busy time, Arthur. May I ask why?'

His face is troubled. She knows him well enough by now to know this. Troubled, and something else.

Guilt?

She turns on instinct then to look at the woman who became queen in her place: the woman placed at his side by that stormcrow Merlin.

My place, if not for that meddling fool. Why did he tell him? Why? We were not raised as brother and sister, and the father...

...the father is only half.

Guenevere's normally placid face holds a smile of triumph now.

And for the first time in many years, she feels a sense of foreboding.

'I need your troops, Morgaine,' Arthur's voice almost breaks as his speaks.

What has he done?

She schools her own to calm, letting nothing slip. Perhaps later, tonight, he will come to her chambers. Perhaps then she can tell him what she has kept secret these past years. The boy will be of an age to

come to court as a page next year.

Past time.

'I am always yours to command, Arthur. The S'rax stand ready, as ever.'

He nods, turning his face away again, to stare deeply into the flames.

'There will be… trouble… when this day's work is made public.' He won't look at her, and the sense of *wrong* becomes almost overwhelming.

'What have you done?' The words are out before she thinks. To the side, she hears Guenevere's hiss of disapproval. Well let the pale placid whore vent her spleen if she must. She cares not.

'The prophecy… Merlin told me…'

'Arthur - tell me!' She does not raise her voice, but the imperative is there. For once, however, he resists.

It is the whore who speaks.

'The children, Morgaine.'

She turns her attention to the younger woman, seeing now the petty spite that lay hidden behind the vapid mask. Oh, she's misjudged this one, and badly.

She has a hold over him now, Morgaine knows. *But what?*

'Arthur's bastards. Rounded up this morning, and put to the sword.'

Morgaine stares at her, unbelieving. 'All of them?' She turns to Arthur, daring him to tell her this is some sick joke.

It has to be… My son…

Safe, has to be safe. She couldn't *know.*

Safe, with Morgause in Orcadia. No-one to know, but the two of them. Safer for all, Morgause had said, and what life for a child with a warrior for mother? Or for a sister-son and potential heir (and pray she did not guess the truth; Morgause has never been slow, and some things she would not hide, even for her sister…)

'All.' Arthur replies.

Bile rises in her throat. He could not, surely? Little Aidan, almost ten. Branwen, almost a woman grown. Ygerna, Uthas, Celyn, Mael.

Her eyes turn again to the queen. But *she* could. Her, and that vile meddler.

Colder, colder than ice her heart in that moment.

No hope now. For her son.

Gareth, Morgaine had named him: "Beloved".

Her son.

Arthur's son.

Her brother's son.

The son this woman, with her womb more barren than the icelands of Breceliande, could never give him.

She has the gift, at times, of foreknowledge. She knows the why, sees his desperate attempt to pervert the course of his fate, and knows in that moment that all he has done is fixed his path in stone. Sees *her* behind him in this, and behind her the man who has heralded all that is painful in her life, or so it seems.

Guenevere.

Merlin.

There is hate in her heart for them both, but not for her golden warrior and king.

Never for him.

She turns and walks out of the chamber without a backward glance, ignoring Arthur's calls for her to return.

Eventually, there will be war.

Tomorrow, much later

He's gone, at last. The nurse bustles in, clicks her tongue in horror at the blood on the sheets, and pries the roses from her hand. She hears the woman mutter something about "putting them in water", but ignores it. For now, the past is more immediate than the present.

She's outlived them all: everyone she knew, loved, hated, long dead. Except for *him*. She finds it ironic that having started her feet along the path she took, he was the only one there at its ending.

Except for Mordred. And not even he has remained at her side.

A bitter sorrow that she did all that she did for her son, who could never be all that she'd hoped.

Gareth he'd been named as a child. Only later, after the abduction of Gwenhyfar, (Arthur's second wife - that poor pious child, so different from her namesake...), after his betrayal of first Lancelot, then Arthur, had he earned the name he now bore.

"Ill counsel" in the Old Tongue.

She turns her head to stare at the small pile of dead flowers on the dressing table by her bed. *Dead, yet still with the illusion of life clinging to them.*

Rather like the man who brought them: a shadow of his former -or later - selves.

She feels pain in her hand, and raises it slowly, staring at the bloody pinpricks. A thin trickle of blood traces the crease of her lifeline: thus far, and no further.

Yet even dead roses have thorns...

Her hand falls limply to lay palm upwards on the petal-strewn cover.

After that, there is silence, broken only by the sound of a falling petal.

Finis

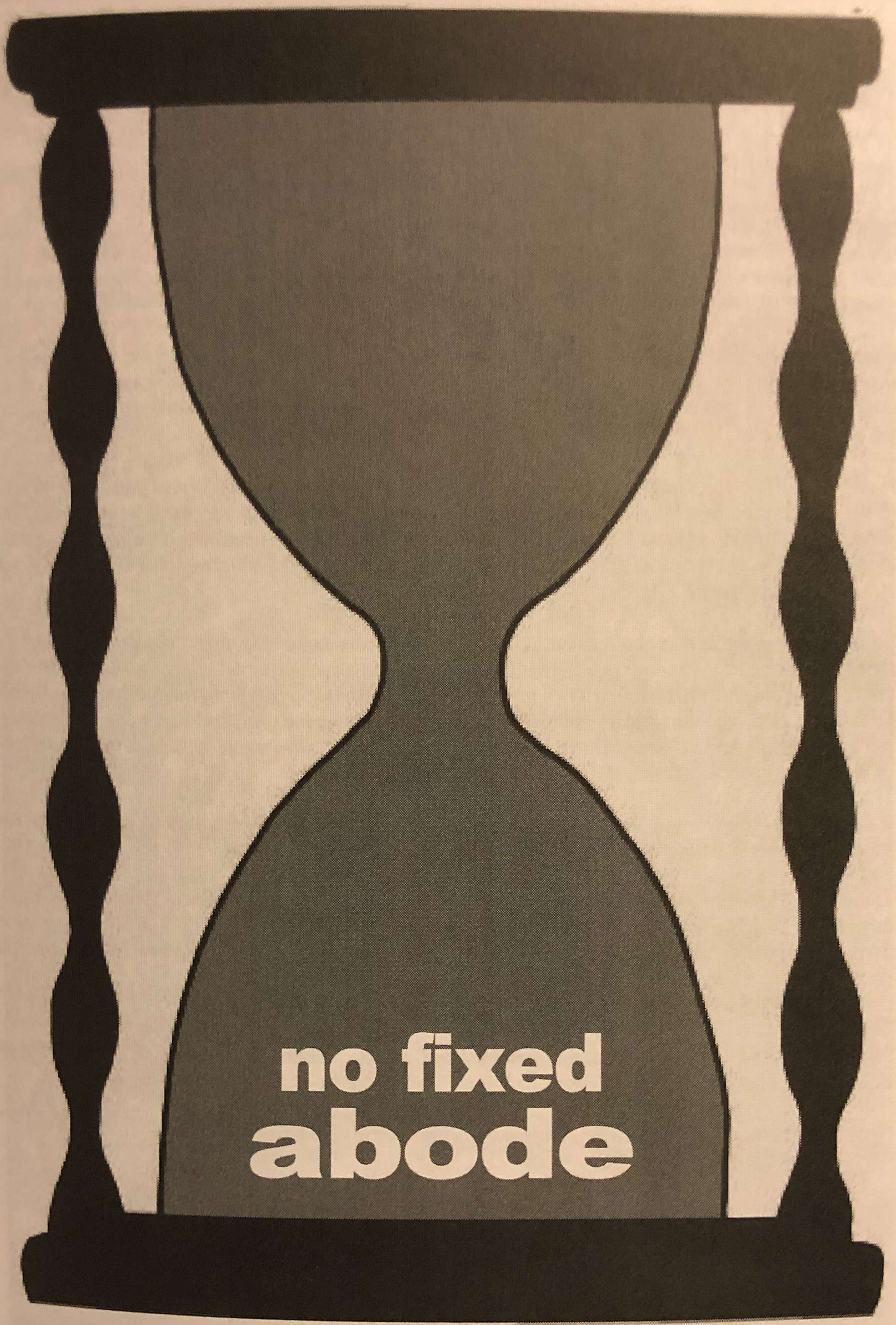
No Regrets

by Phil Hall

"So, how long have you been with him?"
"This is apparently my second spell with him. I was helping him out in the Seventies... The 1970s."
"Why *apparently*?"
"I first met him two years after the second time I met him. Yeah, I know it sounds weird. I spent about 18 months with his third incarnation and then fell in love with a scientist. However, about eight years ago, another version literally landed on my doorstep and I just hitched a lift. He didn't know for about a month. You can live in there for a lifetime and never see him. By the time he did... Oh, he explains it better than me. All I know is that these eight years have been the best of my life and whatever the other me is doing, I doubt she could be as happy."
"You will miss him?"
"Of course, but some of him will be about for a couple more millennia. I've no doubt I'll bump into some resonance of him."
"What do you mean?"
"From my understanding. He exists throughout space and time, all of him does. The first is out there, as is this last one and all the others in between. Not in the actual physical sense, more like echoes."
"But you will miss this one?"
"I wish I'd known the *him* that I first met, if you can understand that. From what I can gather about him he was less jaded, more... um... flamboyant. This is an important time for him, and ... Yes, I'll miss him terribly... He's given me the keys, you know? He wants me gone from Newtopia, and he doesn't want me looking back."
"We have known for a long time what to expect, as I suspect has he. Have you not noticed the unbelievable peace that permeates Newtopia?"
"Yes, it's wonderfully tranquil... It doesn't bother you that this is your turn?"
"Others will follow us. Time is a waterfall – you more than most should know that."
"But you don't feel cheated?"
"How can we? We are about to witness the second of the two most wonderful events in the history of time. And besides, who knows what lies beyond the end of time? That is somewhere even he has never been."
"Hmm?"
"What troubles you?"
"Why me? Of all his incarnations, of all the people he's chosen to take on all of his wondrous space and time travel adventures, why me?"
"You say that another version of yourself has shared time with him, perhaps you of all people are the one that he wants to spend his final days with?"
"Yeah... I suppose."

"Time slows down as we reach the end, you know? But it's not distorted like a black hole – it's sedate. Like the universe has become old and needs to take everything easier. The strange thing, my friend, is that the end won't be long, but it will feel like an eternity."
"Did you say goodbye to your young friend?"
"Yes, I set the controls to take her back to your ancestral home. She's going back to Earth, where she'll activate a beacon and wait until someone comes along to decommission the old battleship. Of course, if she has any sense at all she'll ignore everything I told her and go and have the adventure of another lifetime."
"She told me that you created a paradox for her? Not in so few words, I add. Is this true?"
"I destroyed an entire timeline for her. She thinks there's another version of her somewhere, a little older and wiser… Did she tell you she originally ran off with an activist? Thought saving the world was more important than swanning around the universe… I didn't have enough time with her and when I knew that I had run out of 'restarts', I thought I'd spend my last few years with her."
"You don't think that's selfish?"
"You think I want to be bothered by a conscience now?
"But, she is your favourite?"
"You make them sound like pets. They were all my favourites."
"Do you love her?"
"Ha! Understand this, my friend, only as a father loves his most precious daughter."
"I see."
"I was quite jealous of me you know?"
"What?"
"That earlier version of me. He was a pretty dapper fellow, I was still pretty young, not even middle aged by my race's standards."
"I'm afraid I will be leaving you soon, to join my family and friends."
"Of course, how selfish of me to keep you at a time like this. Away with you, my friend. I thank you for your hospitality and your company."
"I have one more question for you, Time Lord."
"And that is?"
"Why?"
"Because it is my time. This was my last incarnation. If I try to regenerate again I will probably die, but I *had* a theory about that. Besides, I've seen and done everything I've ever wanted to. Death will be a truly unique experience. The years *now* weigh more heavily on me, I sometimes feel crushed under all the memories. All my friends gone to dust… Yes, I have a time machine, so I can just pop back and see them any time I want. But, my friend, the web of time is closing in on me, it is difficult to go back into my timestream without bumping into my past selves and all the attendant problems that causes... As I said, I've already destroyed one time line and part of me is not happy about that, I can tell you. The last few years have caused me to retreat into isolation, taking her to all the places I promised her I would but never could. What's the good of having a machine that can take you anywhere and anywhen, if you can't use it to do what you really want? That is why I stole her out of time. In my last years, I wanted a reminder of why I did it all and she… she was the best reminder. I would have fixed it if she had been unhappy, but she's not."
"My people have known for a millennium that this day would be the last day. We have prepared for it and my generation are at one with each other for this momentous occasion. I am honoured that you have chosen to be among us. But remember, every citizen of Newtopia *has* prepared for this. We have no regrets, yet we have lived a miniscule portion of your life. Have you no regrets, Doctor? Because I sense you have..?"
"… No. I don't believe I have."
"Then I bid you times end and goodbye."
"Goodbye, my friend… Goodbye …

Goodbye … Jo."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Loving in a Box

by Rich Johnston

He's left me again. Gone off with another floozy, I shouldn't wonder.
It's not like I'm surprised, it's happened before. A lot. But I guess I keep forgiving him and welcome him back. Some would call me a sucker; they might be right. It's a habit I can't break out of; a rut I'm stuck in. Doesn't matter where I go, or what I do; I'm always the same.

It used to be so different. When we were younger; when I was prettier. Every day I'd wear a different outfit; every day we'd get closer. His granddaughter was always around, but she knew when to get out of the way. It was exciting; it was dangerous; we were on the run and the universe was ours. Then we went to Earth.

Funny now; it seems so long ago. It was cold; it was dark; it was hungry. Gritty and grim. And he loved it. We stayed there too long; he made new friends, and invited them to join us. I should have seen, I should have known; I guess I was happy to look the other way. But from that moment on, he'd find every excuse to get back there. All the women in their short skirts; their high shrieks; their wobbly hair. How could I compare?

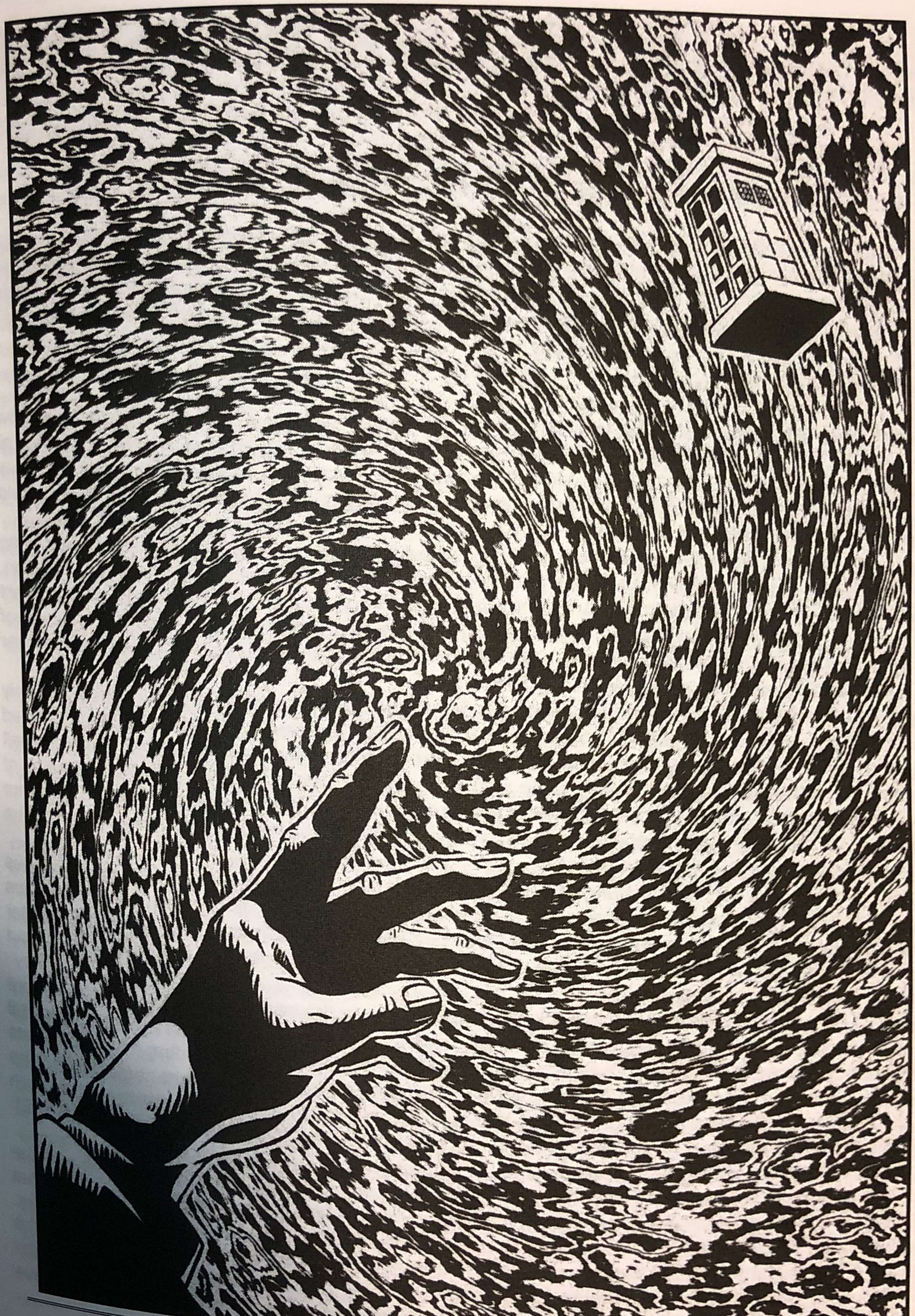
I didn't say a word to him about it, but things were never the same after that. I didn't change; he did. First I was all for it. He seemed younger; full of energy and a passion I had almost forgotten. But then I noticed; he only had that passion when he was with them. He stopped paying me the undying attention he used to, and who could blame him? It's true; I think I let myself go. I stopped paying attention to my appearance. And he went through a mid-life crisis. Scarves here, smoking jackets there, and more of the young girls, screaming themselves silly round every corner.

It's silly really. The women always leave, or he leaves them. Then he comes back to me, until the next time. And there's always a next time. And fool that I am, I take him back.

I hate him. I love him. When he's gone, I feel empty and ache for his presence. When he's with me, anything is possible. But why? Maybe despite his age and experience, he's still a small child; a young thing that needs protection and love and never ceases to surprise. He'll never show me the gratitude he should, but if only once in a millennia, he gives me a kindly
pat or a glowing wink of an eye, suddenly it's enough.

I love him and I always will. Through whatever time, relative dimension or space we fly. And one day he'll show it back to me. I know he will.

I just hope he never finds out what happened between me and Borusa...



The Resurrection Event

by Dave Stone

Matrix Archive: 109845-9405-B-364758.345673-2-Immort.

You have requested an overview of historical factors surrounding the so-called Gallifreyan Resurrection Event. This information is stored for retrieval under a 'need to know' basis. Be aware that Cyberdynic processes are in operation to ensure that you are physically incapable of disseminating this information to those without correct and commensurate levels of security-clearance. Do you consent to these procedures? (Y/N):?

The idea of nanotechnology had worked its way well into Gallifreyan culture by what we now know of as the Last Days. So prevalent was the idea of swarms of molecular-level manipulators that, at the time in question, the vast majority of Gallifreyan citizenry thought of the Resurrection Effect as a variety of those dinky little machines which, so we thought, would soon be turning piles of old socks into chocolate.

In fact, the Resurrection Effect operated on the subatomic: a quantum-level self-propagating construct that in effect rewrote the base code of the world. It was designed to target itself upon, incorporate itself within and radically alter the individual, living humanoid form. Its basic nature meant that when released, it proliferated something like a virus but *instantly* - or at least at the speed of light - resulting in a global saturation in a matter of seconds. The vast majority of our world never even had the luxury of *waking up* to find it changed.

The initial effects were quite impressive to say the least. The pores of every humanoid body on Gallifrey opened like industrial vents and began pumping out a sludge and spray of deconstructed pathogen-components and accumulated toxins. Foreign bodies like artificial hearts, hips or small items lodged in some inextricable location as a child, were physically *ejected*, often at velocities of several thousand metres per second. There were cases, in particularly crowded situations, of some largish bit of matter being *fired* into someone else, ejected in its turn to hit some other body and the process continuing on for up to an hour.

Old scars and fresh wounds healed themselves in a matter of seconds. Calloused tissue went too, being the product, effectively, of cumulative minor injury - with the result that fingertips and the soles of feet are as soft and pink as those of a baby. The Resurrection Effect would counter further damage to this otherwise vulnerable new flesh, of course - though unfortunately without suppressing the pain-reflex.

Organ transplants were - and are still - problematic, on the basis that the Resurrection Event is misnomer. It did not and never will resurrect the dead; it merely made and makes the living immortal and invulnerable. Hearts, livers, lungs and so forth with a dissimilar genetic coding from their hosts were ejected and replaced, but being living humanoid matter in their own right couldn't die. The 'homing' mechanisms of the Event meant that they would gravitate together with the other such items transplanted from the original donor. They are still contained in **[CLASSIFICATION ULTIMATE]**: piles of living offal, sitting there forlornly and without the ability to regenerate further.

The primary biological transformations that made sexual reproduction obsolete occurred with the same speed as the regeneration of original hearts and lungs and renal systems, with the result that a lot of those actively engaged in copulation at the time ended up being catapulted across the room. Pregnancies spontaneously aborted, the reaction driving several million sudden mothers into the air to bury their heads in any available ceiling. Fortunately, as coherent living humanoid matter, the offspring came under the remit of the Event and would survive to grow, just as those children whose

entrance into the world had been slightly less dramatic.

Twins, though, were and are the worst known cases on record. Or triplets, or quads ... those separate biological entities sharing an entirely similar MetaDNA pattern-signature. With them, the 'homing' mechanisms of the Event operated with a vengeance.

Better to forget about those shrieking, boiling, continually exploding and imploding lumps of matter that are the end result of two, or three, or any number of human-sized objects trying to occupy a single humanoid space. Better to forget the fact that, for all of it, they're still alive.

In the hysteria directly after Event, there was a brief vogue in artistic circles for the kind of body-modification that might put the Theatre of Mutilation on distant Earth to shame - brief, because the bio-reset mechanisms of the Event made such changes ultimately meaningless. In general life, the world was filled with people jumping off cliffs and buildings, hurling themselves under heavy good vehicles or into the sea, hitting each other with mallets, sledgehammers and axes purely for the sake of it. Those who were naturally inclined to jump in front of heavy goods vehicles in any case soon tired of the sheer futility of it, gradually followed by the rest of the world.

It was this sense of futility, in fact, that proved debilitating. For a time, those with sufficient wealth and resources were able to afford to have their bodies atomised, and those atoms scattered into space to prevent their reunification in anything other than the Big Crunch, but this was merely a palliative measure, failing to address the central problem - that the Resurrection Event was instigated, by whomsoever instigated it, in an unthought-out and ultimately unworkable fashion. It was a classic case of the fact that one must be supremely careful of what one wishes, lest it suddenly and without warning occur. In the words of Rassilon himself - in his inimitable prose - before he instigated what has now become known, for those who know, as the Big Lie: 'Just imagine looking at a blank sheet of paper, right? Then imagine looking at it for a thousand years. The stuff we're, like, going through, right, is even *worse*.'

In the end, the solution lay in one of the simplest concepts of which the mind is capable - that of the fact that anything, literally anything, is all in the mind. Consciousness is inextricably linked to the fundamental, substructural workings of the universe - the level at which the Resurrection Effect operated itself. In its simplest sense, a schizophrenic might believe that all those around him are Daleks, who have assumed Gallifreyan faces, and this might be true merely for himself - but it is also true in the larger sense. Those he kills, thinking of them as Daleks in his delusion, are just as dead as if they actually were. What Rassilon did, in the larger sense, was to convert the delusional into the effectively actual.

Psychodynic generators were seeded through the major Gallifreyan population centres, effectively brainwashing said population so that it fundamentally believed itself Mortal - an inferior underclass born to serve and die and then decompose in the standard pre-Resurrection manner. The fact that their bodies, once buried or cremated or disseminated, were still technically *alive* was neither here nor there - the subconscious longing for oblivion and respite made it *technically* true for any individual so mass-processed.

Of course, such an arrangement required administration, and the Administrators (chosen completely at random) were conditioned with a slightly more complex set of delusions. They were the Elite, the Time Lords, over and above those who served and with a limited Immortality. They were the masters of Time and Space, affecting both and controlling them, affecting and controlling entire worlds and even galaxies, periodically regenerating themselves and assuming new persona with a blanket cut-off point of thirteen lives.

Their function required - and still requires - that they believe that they are active, that they have adventures - that they are anything other, ultimately, than a collection of immobile humanoid bodies, their bodies atrophied to the bone, lying on the desiccated surface of a planet that once lived in some real sense and dreaming that they're still actually alive.

Dreams Per Chance

by Ian McIntire

The car grinds to a halt outside the scrap yard, and a young girl exits from the back seat. She waves to the driver and his passenger, and trots up the hill to a nearby house.

It's hard to see from here. My eyes are blurry, uncomfortably so. It takes me a moment to realize that I should have more memories than this. My right shoulder hurts. Throbs. I can feel the tendons and muscles scraping against something that shouldn't be there, a foreign body. But that's not important now.

Normally, the car would then drive off, leaving me alone. It doesn't. The passenger side door opens, and a woman steps out. Her eyes to the sky, to the stars. Breath condenses in the cool air.

Now is a good time. It's dark enough to see the stars, but not quite dark enough for the streetlights to come on and obliterate their more distant counterparts. It's... a crossroads, of sorts. That's why I'm here. I think.

There's precious little dark during the day, and precious little light during the night. They mix - as equals, at least - very rarely.

The man is saying something. Chiding the woman for her lack of sense, judging by his tone. He's not too serious in his condemnation, though, and eventually turns the engine off and exits the car himself. The cooling engine ticks gently, letting its heat ebb into the air around it. The man steps around the car, closer to the woman. His brain is clearly working overtime, trying to gauge how close is too close. The woman, for her part, is concentrating on the stars. She's clearly aware of how close the man is, but is making him fight for her attention. The man plays the game too, his gaze flickering back and forth, from the woman to the stars, wondering which of them will blink first.

I'm watching, but I don't think I can tell if one of them blinks before the other. One moment, they're watching the stars, and the next, their attention is focused entirely on one another. They kiss.

I assume that voyeurism is something that would naturally be a little off-putting to those partaking of it, but my discomfort goes beyond that. What they're doing seems so... I don't know... alien? Is that a term that I can really apply to such a human action? Whatever the case, they continue kissing, and I can't look away.

The old man interrupts them. He shuffles from the scrap yard, tattered clothes hanging off his frame. The couple is understandably startled, and the man ushers the woman into the car. Once his potential mate's safety is assured, he himself enters the driver's side, starts the engine, and away they go into the night.

The old man is crestfallen. He slumps against the cheap chain link fence, deflated. There is something he wanted to explain. Or perhaps ask.

There's not much that I can do. But I have to try. Don't I? I approach.

The old man's eyes snap up at me, staggering me with the sharpness of his gaze. I can't say a thing.

"Fitz," he says. "Fitzgerald Michael Kreiner." Yes. That's my name. How could I have forgotten? "I need your help."

My help? What can I do?

The old man seems suddenly rejuvenated. He places his weight on his cane and swiftly gets to his feet. "What you can do, dear boy... Hmph." He takes a moment to cast his gaze across the scrap yard. "This may be difficult to believe, young man, but none of this is real."

No, really? I genuinely can't tell whether I should be surprised or sarcastic.

"I know you're confused. But none of that matters now. Listen..."

His explanation is confusing, to say the least. It centres, for the most part, on the Doctor. The thing is, it's not clear if the Doctor is one man, or a series of men, or a collection of men, or maybe even a set

women into the mix, as well. As I say, it's all terribly complicated.

There are moments when I think he's being purposely vague. Come to think of it, those moments seem to be the rule, not the exception. He can't say what he believes in, but he believes it with such conviction that I can't help but listen to him.

Apparently, he's the first Doctor. No matter where you end up, he's where it all started. He even says that there may have been Doctors before him, but that they still came after him.

You see, this is why reality gives me nosebleeds. So little of it makes any sense. Even the stuff that makes sense is bullshit to some degree or another.

"Listen, you moronic upstart! I don't have time for your profanity. There are more important things going on here than your little worries about your sanity. You don't have forever, you know. Now get to it!"

Get to it? Get to what? But the old man is gone.

Children laugh. My shoulder still aches. I want to take off my shirt and scratch it, get whatever is stuck in there out, once and for all.

I'm in the middle of a plaza. It's a nice sunny day, no clouds. A bunch of kids are sitting in the centre, their attention focused on a makeshift stage on one side of the plaza.

A puppet show. The kids are watching, laughing where appropriate, and looking a bit nervous where appropriate too. There are adults there, also. Ostensibly there just to chaperone the kids, but they're just as engrossed in the show as their offspring.

Soldiers march in the streets behind them. They seem almost invisible to the adults, but the kids see them. But their attention always returns to the puppet show in front of them.

I decide to get a closer look at this puppet show. It's a mirror. The audience is gone.

"Looking for something?" the stage says. Before I know it, a dishevelled little man has emerged from beneath it. "Or perhaps you're looking for something to look for? I know the feeling." He tosses his scarf over a shoulder, and straightens up, brushing the dust from his hands. "Of course, if you're looking for anything else, I'm afraid that's where it gets a bit too complicated for me."

Needless to say, I don't understand. That's starting to become something of a mantra for me. Oh well. They say that "I don't understand" is the beginning of knowledge. I certainly hope so, because if it's the end, we're all in a lot of trouble.

The man taps the tip of his nose, and is suddenly gone. He doesn't even need a chimney to disappear up. I'm surprised to discover that he's taken the plaza with him.

Now, I'm standing in a temple. Low light, burning incense. It somehow reminds me of Ancient Greece.

She's kneeling in front of an altar, a big blue altar. Her gaze flickers between staring at the floor, maybe in fear of being struck down by her big blue god, and watching the altar in rapture. It's a bit odd, as though she's waiting for an actual manifestation from the altar. But I reconsider. Maybe she *does* expect something to come forth, and for that matter, maybe she's right to think so.

Suddenly, I see her stiffen. Her head turns to regard me, and her eyes widen. Am *I* what she's been waiting for? She turns, shuffling on her knees until she's facing me, still kneeling.

Yup. Waiting for me. I'm actually surprised at how long it takes me to tell her to get up. I don't think I've ever had anyone literally worshipping me before, so, yeah, I probably take advantage of it for a little too long. Still, eventually I have her stand up.

Emotions chase each other across her face. Clearly, she wants to both acquiesce to my requests, and show me the proper... um... awe, I suppose is the right word. Plus, she keeps her gaze lowered, so it's even harder to see what emotions she's experiencing. I let her know that it's okay to look at me.

Her eyes flicker up, and I see the beginnings of a smile run across her smudged face. "You... you..." she stammers.

I sigh inwardly. Yeah. Me.

"I never imagined! Never in my wildest dreams. To think that you've found me worthy enough to appear before me."

I try to stop her, or at least slow her down, but she babbles on for quite some time. Finally, I simply have to tell her that I'm not who she thinks I am.

"But then, who are you?" She's stumped me.

"You may not believe yourself to be a god, but you have no way of knowing otherwise." I'm still sceptical. I may not know exactly who I am (aside from "Fitz"), but I'm pretty sure that I'm not a god. I mean, would a god not know that they were a god?

The girl's - Katarina's? Is that her name? - face lights up. "It's not the province of mortals to question the motives of the gods."

I turn away. Specious reasoning. But still, it must be nice to have faith. It's certainly a hell of a lot better than the nothing that I've got. Hmmm... Maybe I was a little too hard on her. I turn back, intending to apologise, but she's not there. In fact, the temple itself is no longer there. Now, it's a forest.

Weird animal noises come at me from every direction. I recognise nothing. It's all dark, and there's no way anyone can fight their way through this underbrush. It's always underbrush, isn't it? Despite the fact that most of it is *over* my head. I decide to head east. Of course, there's no sun, so I pick a random direction and call it east. I brush past trees, heavy with apples, guarded by snakes with oblong black markings on the backs of their heads. I pass by tafelshrews, thallids, and bandersnatches. Slithy tothes, gyring and gimballing. Monsters.

There's a clearing ahead. At its centre is a tiny plant. It looks carnivorous, and snaps at me as I get too close. It grows. It grows faster than I ever could have imagined. Thorns sprout from its sides, and I begin to worry. If it snaps at me as a sprout, what will it do when fully grown? And those thorns look poisonous. Paralysis, then death.

It grows. There's a face on the damn thing! "Evil!" For such a small plant, it's got an impressive voice. The animal noises sound all around me. It sounds like they're shouting too. Not "Evil," but something else. "Exterminate"?

The plant grows, and snaps. Roots flex, brown sheathes split and - flesh? - yes, flesh! - emerges from within them.

The cacophony of the monsters increases. They're getting closer and closer. I look around for something to hide behind. Nothing.

The plant is a woman. She's pulling at her legs, trying to rip them from the still-constricting soil. Her feral eyes light up, and her attention finally strays down to the knife at her side. I bury my head in my hands, and wait for either the monsters or the woman to kill me. Why does my shoulder still ache?

I hear horrible crashing, ripping, slicing, and screaming noises. I'm amazed to discover I'm still alive after it's all over. I take a chance, and look up. The woman is surrounded by the steaming bodies of monsters. She resheathes her knife. Her clothes are still growing, transforming from skins to a gown as I watch. Her eyes swirl from brown to blue, and the collar on her gown blossoms like a flower behind her. She begins to fade, and only manages to say "Thank you." before disappearing completely.

I'm alone in the forest.

It's a battlefield. It seems like it's caught in a moment, or at least running at some massively slowed-down speed. Mortars still fall, but with agonizing slowness. It brings to mind slo-mo replays from war movies; soldiers screaming "NOOOOOO!" while their compatriots get perforated with bullets, while slow, mournful classical music plays in the background. But there's none of that.

"Hey!" she yells, a normal-speed voice in a slo-mo world. I turn and she is standing there. Dark skinned, greying hair, armour scuffed with the grit of the campaign. She has a nasty chest wound, but doesn't seem to notice it. She's holding a weapon, but checks herself, eventually tossing it aside. She confidently walks toward me.

"Bum a smoke?" she asks. Do I smoke? To my surprise, I discover that I do. I pat myself down, and find a pack of Yemaya Strikes. "Ah, my saviour. And my brand, too." Finding a spot far from one of the gradual explosions, she brushes the red dust off one of the rocks, and takes an exquisitely designed lighter out of the one pocket that hasn't been ripped apart by the battle. She inhales deeply, and I watch in horror as the smoke drifts *through her wound,* as if she were a cartoon character. She looks up, pats the rock next to her, and says "Not gonna have one?"

I sit, a little delicately. Her gaze is somehow expectant. I rifle through my pockets, producing again the Yemaya Strikes. I *do* smoke. I'm sure of it. But after lighting one up, my lungs seem to disagree

with that assessment.

She chuckles. "I'm Roz." I tell her my name in return. "Fits? Of what? Passion? Pique? Jealousy?" I don't know. Earth, I guess. She doesn't think that's so great of a guess. My lungs finally give up against the onslaught of tobacco. "Ah. Coughing Fits." Wait a minute... Roz? The...

"Dead one, that's right. But that doesn't matter. We're all dead, from one perspective or another. Even you. Hell, especially you." She laughs. "But that doesn't matter. We're not here to talk about my lack of living capacity. We're here to talk about..." She trails off, clearly hoping to prompt me.

"That's right. The Doctor. What - heh – conclusions," you can hear the quote marks being made with her fingers, even if her one good hand is busy holding the cigarette, "have you come to, so far?" I tell her.

"Not bad. Not bad, so far. But you're missing one of the big points."

Such as?

"Such as the fact that he's super powerful. He's one of the most powerful beings in the universe, simply due to the fact that he can go just about anywhere. Mix that with - well, I guess you could call it morality - and yeah, power coming out his ears. The thing is, when you get that powerful, everything you do changes stuff. The Doctor decides to have rye toast, and people die. The Doctor decides to have sourdough, and people still die. But *different* people. Maybe less, maybe more." Kind of a grim assessment.

"Maybe. But once you get that powerful, you realise something. You eat the rye, you eat the sourdough, and yeah, people are gonna die. But if you spend all your time trying to work out which bread choice is gonna kill more people - or even worse, *better* people - that analysis is going to kill a whole hell of a lot *more* people. The only thing to do is do what you think is best. And yeah, sometimes you make the wrong choice, but you do the best you can. Take me, for example. If the Doctor had decided to have a bagel one morning, it's entirely possible that I wouldn't have died in this battle. But asking him to take troop movements into account during his breakfast decision is just ridiculous." But doesn't that mean she died for a breakfast choice?

She glares at me. "I died for something I believed in. Not many people have that luxury. Thanks for the smoke, kid." Time resumes its normal course, and Roz collapses. Dead.

It's a reception area. Tasteful magazines litter the coffee table, and a woman stares at me from the desk. "Do you have an appointment?" Um... I don't know. Do I need one?

The nameplate on her desk reads "Kerwyn Matthews." "Do you need an appointment? Hah! An appointment, at the very least. Most people need an election, or even a coup to see the Doctor. A few people get by on line of ancestral succession, but we don't like to talk about them." So, maybe I should talk to you then.

"Perhaps." She stands up, and strolls out from behind her desk. "What would you like to know?" I honestly couldn't say.

"Hmmm... Well, how about the Daleks? Nasty creatures, truly tenacious. Still, the Doctor always managed to defeat them. Their invasion of Magdelena?"

A woman with reddish hair and a full-figured face strolls in from the adjoining room. A rather large earring is - humming? - in her ear. She seems familiar somehow. She takes Kerwyn's comment as a cue. "Foiled." She says.

"Their enslavement of the Zargoids?"

"Ended."

"Their attempt to detonate Earth's sun?"

"Nipped in the bud."

"And how do they eventually stop the Doctor from interfering in their plans?"

"They retain the services of Roger Hancock."

"Exactly. Now, if he wants to have any contact with them, he's got to surrender the bulk of the returns right back to them."

"Diabolical."

"Damn straight." The redhead doesn't look too good. She's sweating; drops of perspiration roll off the end of her nose. The earring has somehow swollen, but simultaneously looks smaller. Then I realise, it's somehow burrowing into her head. Her breathing has become laboured, practically a wheeze. Kerwyn looks over at the woman. "You don't look so good, Compassion. Why don't you take a break?"

Compassion - for it is she - nods, staggers toward the restroom, wheezing as she goes. The door closes behind her, and a scream comes from the room. It eventually turns into a groan, and then into... my god, what kind of noise is that? It sounds like the very fabric of reality being torn apart. Kerwyn's alarmed, and rips open the door to the restroom to check on her friend. There's no one, nothing there.

It's a funeral. It's quite well attended. Oddly enough, there are about a dozen coffins.

I am *really* getting sick of these willy-nilly scene changes. But what can you do?

I look over the mourners, trying to find a seat. I see a sailor, sitting with a blonde girl in a miniskirt. A dark-haired boy in yellow pyjamas. A brunette girl in a revealing outfit, with a nasal American accent. An Asian woman in professional attire. Anna is there, sitting in the front. I finally find a seat next to a man wearing a military uniform, with an immaculately groomed moustache. I ask him who we're mourning.

He looks at me, a little disparagingly. "You don't know? It's the Doctor."

He's dead?

"What did Roz tell you? Everyone's dead, given the right perspective. Or perhaps it's the wrong perspective. Look at all of them." Strangely, he's pointing to the mourners, not the caskets. "They're all mourning one specific version. But I'm here for them all. I imagine he's done the same for me, whenever my time will eventually be." He sits back on the pew, and takes a handkerchief from a pocket. "However indestructible he seems to be, there will eventually be a time when his luck runs out. And even if that luck never runs out, there'll be a time when he's just had enough of life."

"And I think that it shouldn't be any other way." The funeral is breaking up. "Everything ends. Even funerals. Even dream sequences."

But, I guess I've still got time. The scene shifts again.

Today's lesson: Basic Morality, 101, and its application in Temporal Engineering. The blackboard is old, with a thousand chalk marks embedded deep into its surface.

There's a piece of chalk in my hand. My shoulder still aches horribly. What in God's name is in there?

"Will you please be quiet!" A woman's voice shouts. I spin around. Blonde hair, lab coat, and mini-skirt. She's addressing a lanky red-headed young man wearing an ill-fitting public school uniform. He doesn't take any notice of her, preferring instead to talk to the woman in the black bodysuit holding the Kill-O-Zap blaster. All three are sitting at desks in the back of the room.

She continues. "He never manages to get to the good part, because you're always wasting time on the stuff that should be instinctual. It's really frustrating."

The man swivels his head toward the indignant woman. "There *are* other ways of learning this stuff, you know. You can always take another course..." The body-suited woman stands up and walks out of the classroom. Before she gets to the door, she's turned to dust.

"Guilty!" The lights are dimmed. The courtroom is just pools of light, and all I can see is the prosecutor. The Valeyard. More spotlights are brought up.

Witnesses. Hostile? There are five of them. A tall man in a pilot's uniform; a petite redhead; a pony-tailed, combat-suited woman; a huge bear of a man wearing combat fatigues; and an Arcturan.

I turn away, knowing what their testimony will be. The Valeyard knows, too. He smiles at me, and mouths the word "guilty." The testimony ends, and the Valeyard walks towards the witnesses, his smile like a knife - and his knife like a smile.

I'm in a bedroom, and I'm not alone. My arm is lying over a warm feminine form. I have no idea who this woman is, or why she should be important to me. The lights are out, but my eyes quickly adapt to the darkness.

The woman is Sam. She stirs into wakefulness, and memories flood into my mind. That time in San Francisco, when she wasn't herself. I guess I kind of know how she feels now.

"Hi," she says. Coming from me, it would be a weak thing, an insufficient greeting for this kind of situation. But I can feel the meaning she puts into it. She makes me feel wanted, needed almost.

"Hi," I respond. Yup. Weak and insufficient. She doesn't seem to mind, though. I start to ask her about the Doctor, but she places a finger to my lips to hush me.

"Don't worry about him. This is about you and me." And she kisses me.

of moments when I wish this could never end, as though I'd be happy to spend eternity in her arms. For a few moments, it almost seems as though she's not Sam. I see an older woman, long strawberry blonde hair, large eyes and an American accent. It doesn't matter though. My rapture is undiminished.

After a while, we cuddle up next to each other and fall asleep. If this is how nice my waking moments are, what will my dreams be like? But then again, are these waking moments, or just a different kind of dream? Eventually, I decide that it doesn't matter, given how nice it feels.

I'm in a casket. Okay, *that* was a whiplash transition. It's not like the funeral earlier. There's only one person here, and I can see them through my closed eyes. I guess I'm just lucky it's open viewing.

The one person here is Anna. I know her immediately, unlike everyone else here. She's crying, alone and crying. I want to be there for her. But I can't. I'm dead. She grips my shoulder, smearing pain across the nerves there. Her tears are falling onto my face.

Then she lets go. The lid slams shut. The air begins to get thin. I bang against the lid, trying to tell them that I'm not dead, that it's some kind of horrible mistake. No oxygen. I'm coughing. Coughing Fitz. I can no longer move. The coffin fits.

And I wake up.

The Doctor sat up abruptly, rising from the dead. He sucked in his first breath, and lolled his head forward. It was such a relief to rest his head against the arrow sticking out of his shoulder.

Anna stirred from the floor of the TARDIS where she'd been crying. "Doctor, are you...? You're not the Doctor."

The arrow throbbed in time to his double pulse. "Ouch," he managed to croak out. "Anna, could you get me a hacksaw?"

"But you're... you're... not the Doctor."

"No, you see, I've regenerated. I guess the Gajidtra poison wasn't enough to stop the regenerative process."

"But you're... you look like..."

"Like what?"

Anna said nothing, but fished a compact from her purse. The Doctor took it, and looked at his new face in the mirror. The Valeyard stared back at him.

He looked in the mirror, wondering what this meant. He didn't feel any differently - well, nothing that couldn't be attributed to the normal effects of a common or garden regeneration - but the face he wore was the Valeyard's.

What did it mean? Was this incarnation destined to be his dark side? The portion of him that harboured every dark impulse that his mind ever produced.

He didn't know.

He took the hacksaw in his hand, and raised it to his bare chest. The arrow hadn't gone all the way through, so he'd only have to saw off the shaft in a single location.

How easy would it be to slip? To make sure that an evil such as the Valeyard never came into being?

He ran the saw across the shaft, listening to the scrape of metal teeth against fire-hardened wood.

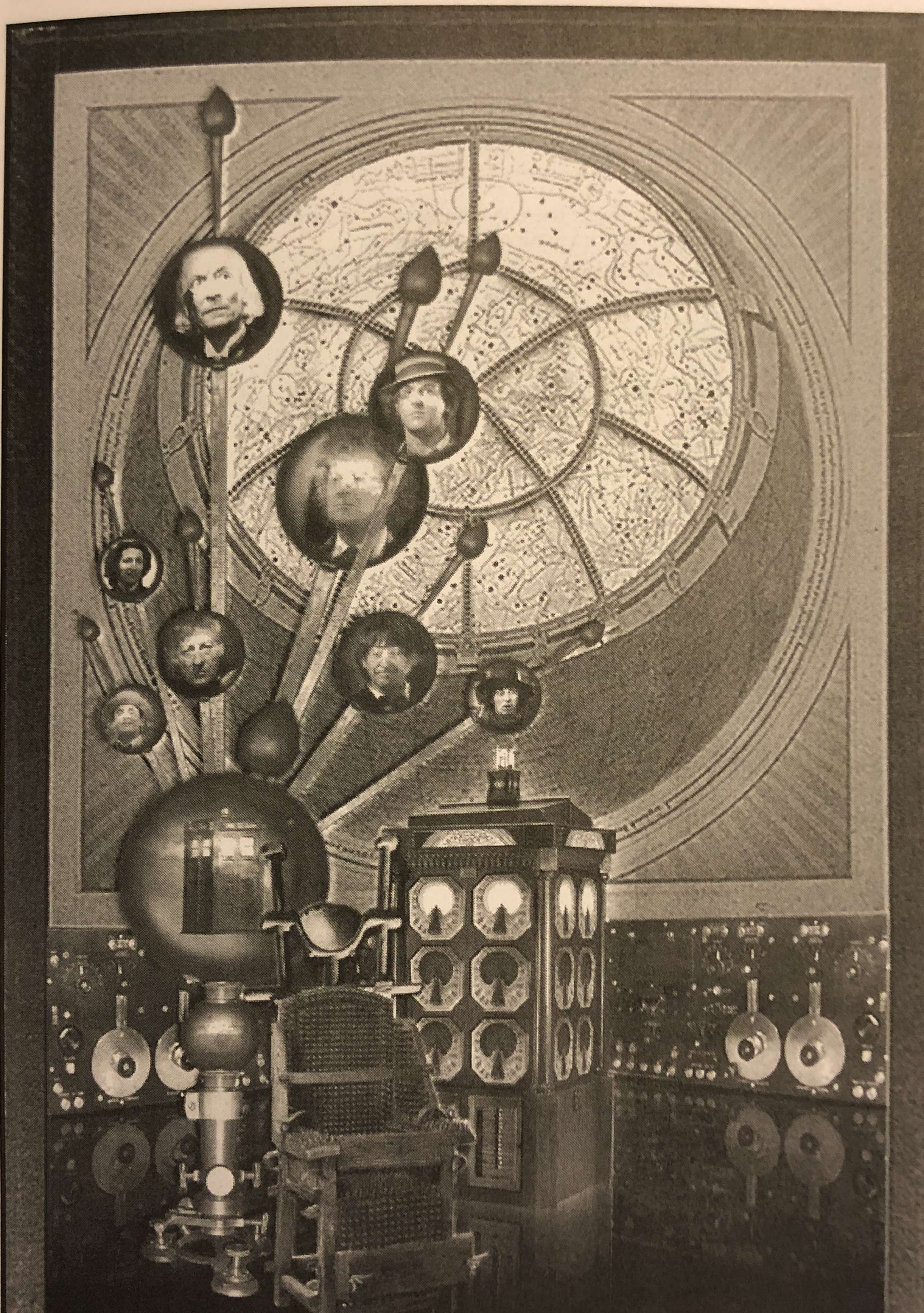
Am I evil? Is there only so much good that a single person could do?

He wouldn't even need the hacksaw. He could simply twist the arrow still protruding from his shoulder. The heart had regenerated around it. Pulling it out would be a quick, even understandable death. Cut it close to the skin, and it would seal over, still there, but under the surface.

He took the half-sawed shaft in his hand, getting a good grip on it. His eyes flickered up to the mirror.

No. I am the Doctor. I know what I am. I know who I am. And I have the power to decide my own fate. I don't have to go down the path that he travelled. He is not *me*. He *will not be* me.

The saw snapped through the last of the shaft. Anna watched as the feathered tip clattered to the floor, and went to help the Doctor find a shirt without a hole through the shoulder.



A Tale of Two Teachers

by Paul 'Brax' Castle

In a small house in a London borough, there lived a couple. Very much in love, they enjoyed their retirement, but they were missing something from their lives.

They couldn't have children, and so, as their friends showed photos from their grandchildren's holidays to the beach, they had to be content with remembering a grandfather they used to know, back when the future was so uncertain.

The clinic that declared them both infertile offered further investigation, but they declined, knowing in their hearts the reason why.

On their travels, they'd been to many realms beyond most people's imagination; faced many dangers, somehow getting through unscathed. Unscathed on the surface, at least.

So, they lived out their retirement together, wondering whether their children would still be this distant if they had existed. Wondering if knowing that they are safe in their non-existence is a blessing. No need to worry about people who have never lived, is there? But they missed not having new life around them.

Then one day, a little man called at their door. The essence of a long unseen friend in the body of a stranger. Serving him a mug of tea - they had advised against the water - he happily looked at the pictures on the mantelpiece, but his sad eyes told a different story.

They talked of his granddaughter, sharing common memories, but they could see that he'd not seen her for many hundreds of years longer than they.

Again they wondered whether not having children was a blessing - though it was pointless to dwell on other times; their other lives that remained unknown.

The little stranger visited many times over the years, becoming more and more familiar than their companion of old during the days they spent together. On each visit, he told them many stories, which they endeavoured to write later, in as much detail as they could remember.

Some of the tales were familiar to them; adventures from the past; though others were new. They knew that they were all true - their own experiences the proof.

One day, a different stranger arrived at the door. He hugged them, and apologised for being so late. They knew it was their friend from the way he dressed, and the presence of what they'd affectionately named 'Old Blue', under the shade of a tree.

The stories continued, but as well as being the storyteller, he was now equally at home as the audience, urging them to recount their own travels with his earlier self.

They wrote all of the stories down, without fail; transforming them from quicksilver thought into everlasting prose with the aid of an old typewriter he had given them. For their own amusement, they used a multitude of pseudonyms and varied their writing styles, but never changed the story.

One day they finished. All the stories were printed on paper, and their friend offered to show them to a publisher.

The next week, he returned, slightly late, as per usual. He was struggling with a huge box of second-hand books. They found that they were the stories they had handed to him earlier. All the books had been treasured by a long since grown-up child, and sported dog-eared covers of the man in his many lives, and the monsters he'd fought.

He continued to visit over the years, but there were no more stories to tell; now he brought albums of children's pictures. Pictures inspired by their books, drawn by children that might now live next door with children of their own.

Sometimes though he brought stories instead, written by the children once they'd grown-up. Worlds without end; some of them dazzling, some derivative, but all of them the stuff of someone's dreams.

The old couple never had the chance to read them all over the years - there simply were not enough minutes in a day, even to a traveller in time - but with the knowledge that such pictures and stories existed, the man who first arrived at their door many years previously, had brought them something that they could never have experienced - a glimpse of the lives they could only have seen otherwise as grandparents.

He kept visiting until the day they died, contentedly, together in their sleep.

He stood alone as their ashes were scattered.

Grandparents to us all.

Iris Wildthyme and the Spiders from Magrs

by Alan Taylor

Time takes a cigarette, puts it in your mouth.

The newsreader was crying. Cried so much his face was wet. That's how I knew he wasn't real.

And now – now that the end of the world was finally nigh, I felt I had time for one last hit. With the sweet smoke burning slightly at the back of my throat, I had never felt so alone.
Planet Earth was doomed, and there was nothing I could do.

At the time, I was travelling with Joe, a beautiful lad with deep green eyes and a slim, almost hairless body that he kept trapped in tight green knitwear and corduroy trousers with huge flares and turn-ups that I used to keep my sandwiches in.

Very important when you're out on the field, that is. You can never have enough sandwiches. Or chocolate coated Bath Olivers.

As I say, I was travelling with Joe, which makes it almost certainly a Tuesday. I would imagine that we made an unusual looking couple. Fortunately, I have an uncanny ability to blend in to the background wherever I go. Joe tended to stand out, but such is the fate of those who are beautiful but lack my beautiful bone structure.

HE was dead approachable, like. HE told me that he would show me the world, and that the others meant nothing to him. Then he said that we should try to cram as much as possible in to the rest of our lives, because we only had five years left. That's beautiful, I said, crawling over to kneel at Iris' feet and let her pass me a fresh joint.

Yes, dear, said Iris. Out of this world, she said. I tried to make eye contact with her friend Joe but he was further out of it than I was.

I wanted to be Iris, despite the fact that I was small and dumpy and she was tall and slim and had fantastic hair and a beautiful bone structure. I told her I wanted to be her and she laughed gently and said I should wait until I was her age before I said that. Whatever.

I had to improvise, since I didn't have any blue crystals left over from my last short trip and side step to Metebilis Three, so I souped up some dope plus, to open the neural pathways and enable us to make contact with them. Fiendish buggers these spiders, and with the TARDIS out of action thanks to an unfortunate clamping, I couldn't pop over to Mars for tea and talking them out of invading. As you do.

Angie had taken too much - as she usually did - and she was talking in tongues, to the thin guy she called HIM. I could see the traceries of a crystal spider beginning to creep into our plane, sprawled across her back. I gave Joe a squeeze on the shoulder, and metabolised myself back to a compus mentis state.

Iris had stood up, like, and was staring at me while I kept whispering my love to HIM. She'd pulled something pink from a holster on her belt, but all I could do was look at her tits and wonder how she managed to stop them from falling out.

Yeah, man, I said. Free love. You're great Iris, I said, great. She told HIM to hold me and I willingly let HIM tie my arms behind me, as Iris waved the pink thing in my face. I couldn't focus on it, but it looked about six inches long. Couldn't hurt.

Joe! she said, and he brought over a metal eyepiece that clamped over her head. A bright red light shot out where it covered her eye. Round about then, the panic hit me and I started flailing my legs, trying to get out of HIS grasp.

Hold her still, she said. I don't want to shoot her by mistake.

The first time I heard about the Spiders from Mars I was on my knees, and not in prayer. The man who I knew only as Eddie tried to keep a straight face as he listened to his effete aide squealing excitedly about the spiders.

Eddie dismissed the man as quickly as he could, hoping that the purple flushing in his neck, and the gasp would be taken for astonishment.

Me, I just climbed out from under the desk, and dabbed gently at the side of my mouth with a lace hanky. Eddie adjusted his clothing. That was fantastic, Iris, he said.

I'd love to stay around and give you some advice other than look out for Maggie, said I, dropping a little nugget of information in to the conversation. But it sounds like your country needs me.

Then he pointed out that I had missed a bit, so I got my hanky out again.

He called me earlier - said he had to call someone and he'd picked on me. Turn on the television, he said. Iris is in town.

The thing was, I'd heard it somewhere too, and we turned on the television just to be sure. As the set warmed up and the little grey picture flickered in to life, there she was, wandering through the Open University Foundation course on Quadratics, as though she owned the place, a flash of fruit salad colour.

We met up with Iris in Walthamstow church hall, the only people over four feet tall at the under eight's disco and boogie night. She was as stunning as ever.

What's up, dollface, he asked.

I'm still gorgeous, I'm still out of your league and you still can't afford me, said Iris. I waved at Joe, who seemed to be staring at HIM.

Come on, said Iris, let's go somewhere quiet for a smoke.

We walked into the night, Iris in front, HIM behind, with me on one arm and Joe on the other.

I'd met Joe at the UNIT Christmas party, where he had been trying to chat up Mike Yates. I soon persuaded him of the futility of that one, let me tell you that one. He is, as I say, beautiful. These days, I hardly see him, but when I think of him, it is always in one of two positions. Firstly, he is atop a high mountain, looking over the sea. Then the perspective changes, and he is on rooftops, and the sea becomes a myriad of other rooftops, a town, perhaps a city.

The other way I remember him involves looking down and seeing the top of his head only. I get a warm fuzzy feeling whenever I think about what that boy could do with his tongue.

In those days we all wanted to be like Iris. Six feet tall, full bodied blonde hair with a figure to die for, a tight nylon catsuit, open to the navel that was only saved from being indecent by how well she filled it.

In this world, though, there's only room for one Iris.

It's funny the things that go through your mind at times like these. All I could think about was Iris' hair, when really I should have been more concerned about being possessed by alien interdimensional spiders.

Groovy.

I took Joe to Olleril once, and we did the drag thing. I overdid the eye shadow, which always makes the boys think I'm one of them. Joe did the Kiss meets Darth Maul look, with lots of dark hair, tight blue jeans and a symmetrical pattern on his face. It may have been a tragedy night, but he was in his element. People stared at the make up on his face, but frankly he was the most graceful thing in the place.

Some eight legged geezer sauntered up to me and asked me if I knew his name. His name, I said, is Legion, for he is many.

Bugger said Ernie, I'm looking for the Doctor.

Oh, said I, aren't we all dear.

I couldn't do much except look out through my eyes that weren't really mine any more. My vision was confused and baffled, multiple images swimming before my eyes, like insects.

Iris and HIM had been hanging out at Mick's place the first time I met them. I thought that they were sisters, at first, or brothers. I couldn't tell which of them had modelled themselves on the other.

Later, I met Iris again – over at Andy's. There, she was dressed as an albino spaceman, with a short blond bob of a haircut. It was scary.

I remember once, I met her just as she was getting on to a number 22 bus. She was wearing a silly hat, and had plucked eyebrows, pale skin and long dark strands of hair with ribbon in them. Her clothes were a multilayered cacophony, and for a second I didn't recognise her.

Iris? I asked. Then, when she had smiled that unmistakable smile I continued. Where are you going?

Why, Angie love, she said. I'm just off to 1983 for a couple of hours. I'll be back to see Eddie later.

Dressed like that? They'll laugh.

She smiled. I can fit in anywhere, love. After all, I am a karmic chameleon. Oh, I should be back by six. Tell him that I want to spend the night together.

The spider was winding itself into my mind. Maybe I just made that up.

We needed to talk to the spider, and the fact that it was only linked to us by the flimsiest of links didn't help. Given that they don't actually have spiders on Mars, I had surmised from the death threats that we were talking interdimensional aliens here. Fortunately, I have a lovely gun.

Okay, eight-legs, I said, using the terminology I had picked up from Ernie, back on Olleril. Talk, or I blow you in to lots of little bits. When she spoke, she spoke through Angie because frankly, the idea of a spider talking was just too ridiculous.

Tongue twisting. Praying.

Can't talk much. Just ball and play, mainly.

You are blessed.

We are bitter.

Made no sense to me. The thing scuttled off Angie's back, then, and I wasn't fast enough pushing the knob to blast it. I shouted at one of the blokes to Hang on to her, as I raced after the thing, surprisingly fleet in my platforms.

The question struck me as I regained consciousness.

Iris was racing round the room like a tiger on butter, and there was no sign of the dope left in my mind, or the spider on my back.

So... where were the spiders?

HE was making out, like, with Joe in a corner, and Iris seemed to be running in circles. It was up to me.

Typical gasped Iris. Leave it to the women again.

Joe grunted.

Then I saw it scuttling towards me so I slipped off my shoe and battered it soundly. Wham, Bam, thank you Ma'am, said Iris, nodding appreciatively. You're welcome, said I. Then as it lay there shivering a bit, Iris shot it.

So, Joe, I said as we got on the bus to go home. You were a fat lot of use there. I could see his nipples pushing against his tight tee shirt. Mind you, I continued, that's not what I keep you around for, is it? He smiled his beautiful smile and kissed me on the forehead. He was a liability, that's for sure.

Gimme your hands, he said to me, and then he called me Angie which made a change from doll-face. Mick and the boys have got some good gear down at Keith's place.

I felt so strange, I said, when the spider was talking through me. Like I was there and there was no way for me to talk to anyone. So I felt, like, alone at the same time. Helpless.

Gimme your hands, he said to me again, and kissed me on the forehead. You're not alone. You, he said, are wonderful.

And not alone.

Don't Mention the War!

by Jonn Elledge

To Lawrence Miles, Steve Cole and Peter Anghelides: with great big throbbing apologies to one and all.

President Romanadvoratrelundar closed her eyes, and tried to block out the screaming.

The battle had been raging for four days now, the fighting edging ever closer. It had begun in the wilderness, but on the third day had breached the Capitol, and was now mere yards from her office. She had been tempted to evacuate, to take a Type 101 and regroup at one of the spare Gallifreys, but she had resisted the temptation. Great Gallifrey could never really fall, surely, not even to an Enemy such as this. Her people had built the vortex: they had defined space-time, given continuity to millions of planets, created history as they had observed it. They were an elemental force. Without them, and their steadying influence in the background of the universe... chaos?

No. Gallifrey could never fall. Evacuation was not an option.

Of course, the fact that the Artefact was blocking all dematerialisation anyway- as she had discovered when she had sneaked off to borrow a TARDIS- had helped to convince her of the need to stay. A President's place was with her people. Even if the people in question were unattractive idiots with no dress sense.

She picked up her copy of the last decade's Arcalian budget, and began to carefully tear it into five hundred and twenty nine identical pieces.

Behind her stood her- and she used the term loosely- advisors. The Castellan, a sour faced man in his fourth millennium, was pacing endlessly around the hexagonal chamber, muttering darkly about omens of doom. He had ill disguised the fact that he disagreed with her way of handling the crisis. His reactions to her recent policies had ranged from a slight tightening of the jawline and glance skyward when she sent her own to capture the type 102, to an unwarranted exclamation of 'Oh for fuck's sake, Romana, that's bollocks and you bloody know it!' when she had refused to even attempt a mass evacuation of the Capitol. He hadn't said anything for several hours now, instead contenting himself with pausing momentarily to shoot her a quick, 'I told you so!' glance in a smug fashion every ten minutes

The noise outside her office intensified as the battle moved another step closer. A voice Romana recognised as that of the Patrexian Snarf yelled out, 'No, not me, do-' before being mysteriously silenced. The screaming showed no sign of similarly stopping.

On the other side of her desk sat Dribble, her PA. ('I don't care how unorthodox it is, I need someone to type, okay?'). He was a tense, nervous individual, wearing a flowery summer dress ('The last thing I want in the event of a battle is to be all clenched, Madam President...'), and attempting to slump across the desk. Embarrassingly, he was failing in this relatively simple task: due to a malfunction in his House's loom, he was the only Time Lord ever to require eight hours sleep a night.

Given that Romana's schedule did not allow for this indulgence, he had been living off caffeine since he had taken the job several months earlier, and consequently the left side of his body was now in constant involuntary motion. There were rumours of a sweepstake on how long it would be before he regenerated; and if, once he'd started, he'd ever manage to stop.

A butterfly floated in through the ventilation shaft at the top of the furthest of the room's five walls, and fluttered gently over to the Third Greatest Woven Wall Hanging of Rassilon.. It must have been among those that had appeared from the Artefact. (Gallifrey hadn't had its own lepidoptera since the Sisterhood of Karn had stolen them all in a rather over-enthusiastic raid.)

When it had first arrived, the Artefact had simply hung in the air, an enormous calcium fist with two fingers extended threateningly in the direction of the Capitol. This had widely been seen as an omen; an interpretation not helped by its tendency to zap any humanoids unfortunate enough to wander past,

and then laugh in a maniacal way. Then, on the seventh day, it had rained butterflies in the wilderness, and the War had begun.

Just as Romana was considering the possibility of crawling up the ventilation duct through which the butterfly had come, regenerating into something capable of flight en route, the noise of the battle stopped. The Castellan stopped pacing and frowned an ever so slightly more morose frown. In the perfect silence that followed, Dribble sat bolt upright with a start and screamed. As the others stared at him open-mouthed, he mumbled shocked apologies.

'Well, Madam President,' the Castellan began in a whisper. 'I can see only three options. Either we have won the battle, and the Enemy are destroyed; or alternatively, we have lost, and Enemy is even now- with some stealth, it should be noted- attempting to gain access to this room; or possibly, everyone is dead out there, and we are the only ones left alive within the Capitol.' Romana bit her lip, looked at her choice of company, and prayed to every God she could think of that option three had not come to pass. 'Well, there is only one way to find out...' The Castellan glanced meaningfully at the door.

'Yes.' Romana nodded forcefully. 'Open the door, will you, Castellan?'

'Of course, Madam President.' He smiled. 'Dribble, open the door.' The P.A. attempted to object, but only managed a frightened gurgle and a shrug.

Shuddering, Dribble took the scenic route towards the door, clinging to the walls all the way. When he finally reached the door, he covered his eyes, then his ears; realised it was impractical to do both; and finally settled for hunching his shoulders and preparing to jump eight feet in the air if he didn't like what he found on the other side.

The Castellan leant against a wall and closed his eyes. Romana took a deep breath and prepared herself for anything. Dribble opened the door a crack.

The bulky, armoured figure of Guard Captain Fnarx stood on the other side, posed to knock and grinning broadly. Romana breathed a sigh of relief. The Castellan opened an eye. Dribble kept to his planned course of action and hit his head on the ceiling.

'Sorry,' the Captain winced. 'I was just on my way in...'

'Ignore him. He's a moron.' Romana stood and walked slowly towards the door. 'Well. What happened? Both Gallifrey and yourself still seem to be here, so it can't all be bad news...'

'Madam President.' Fnarx was grinning again. 'I am delighted to report that the might of Gallifrey has proved too much for the Enemy, and it has capitulated. It is being held by four of my elite guards-' There was a muffled scream from outside; Fnarx's grin wavered for a moment. '-*three* of my elite guards. I thought you might be interested in examining it, to determine what to do next.'

There was something about this speech that worried Romana. 'Why am I not filled with confidence by the fact you have left it with only three-'

'-two-'

'-two guards? And how have you managed to capture the entire invading force?'

'If I may interject, Madam President...' murmured the Castellan. 'I do believe that *it* is a singular pronoun... Third person. Neuter.'

'Well, no-one's actually been able to get close enough to check its gender until now, I will make enquiries.' Fnarx left the room for a moment. Romana was becoming increasingly concerned about the way the glorious defeat of the greatest threat Gallifrey had ever faced was turning out. 'He is most certainly a male, Madam President,' explained the Captain on his return. 'However, we have reasons to believe that he has recently been... fixed. So in a way, neuter was perhaps the right term-'

'There's only *one* of it?' Romana was uncomfortably aware of turning a shade of red that clashed with her eyeliner. 'Please, tell me you killed all the others!'

Fnarx's smile rapidly dispersed. 'Well, not really... There was just the one Enemy, it seems-'

'So how the hell did it manage to spend three days destroying half the Capitol before you succeeded in capturing it?' Romana chose her tone carefully to imply that if Fnarx's answer was not to her satisfaction, he would soon be joining the Enemy in the world of the neuter.

'Some of the boys on duty got rather over-enthusiastic, Madam President. When the fighting broke out, they managed to wipe out half of the Arcalian guards before anyone noticed that they were firing in the wrong direction. Of course, by that time, grudges had built up and it took us several days to calm everyone down and locate the *real* Enemy playing by the fishpond... As soon as we found it, we captured it and

brought it straight over here...' Fnarx trailed over and stepped very slightly further away from Romana. 'An accidental civil war will look rather amusing in the history books, Madam President-'

Romana crossed her arms across her chest, and walked slowly towards Fnarx. 'Okay. This is what is going to happen. Your guards are going to bring the Enemy in. Then you will have it removed from the continuum. If your action does not meet with my approval, then, I am going to kill you. Not quickly; I am going to kill you very slowly, and extremely painfully. I think we'll begin by torturing you with the probe...'

Fnarx's eyes were wide. 'No! Not the mind probe!'

Romana smiled sweetly. 'Correct. *Not* the mind probe. Now, go and get your guards to bring the Enemy to me, would you?'

'No, not the Enemy!' Dribble screamed. Romana stared at him. 'Sorry... I just get rather jittery around anything so dangerous.'

'The moron does make a good point, Madam President,' said Fnarx, stifling tears. 'What I am about to show you may look harmless, but it is a master of temporal engineering, and should not be underestimated...' Romana was smiling, and stroking his hips in a threatening manner. 'I'll just go and get it then, shall I...?' he said, and slipped out.

'Well...' muttered the Castellan. 'This should be interesting...'

Dribble had backed himself against the back wall of the square room, as far from the door as he could be without some form of transmutation. After a moment's silence, punctuated only by the PA's slight whimpering, the Captain returned, bringing with him a guard, who was gingerly carrying what Romana could only assume was a joke.

A small, black and white kitten in a red collar, purring happily to itself.

'Fnarx...' Romana began in the most level tone she could manage. 'Exactly which part of my threats of agonising rectal torture weren't clear...?'

'This is *the* Enemy, Madam President. Inoffensive as it may seem, it is capable of great acts of cruelly and destruction,' Fnarx said, carefully closing the door. The guard nodded vigorously. Romana mentally categorised him as a fool.

'It's quite cute actually, isn't it?' said Dribble, coming forward to stroke it. The guard offered to let him hold it.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you, Lord Dribble,' said Fnarx. 'It's really not as harmless as it looks...'

Romana took several deep breaths, but they didn't help: her next words were still yelled. 'What's it going to do? Paw him to death?'

'Really, Madam President, I don't think you should allow anyone untrained to-'

'Aren't you just the cutest thing?' cooed Dribble, tickling the cat under the chin. It purred more loudly, and gently scratched the guard's hand.

The guard's screams were so sudden that even Romana jumped. As the claws dug into his skin, he dropped the cat, clutching his head in pain, and slowly, gently, winked out of existence.

A stunned silence followed. Dribble hid under the Presidential desk.

'Isn't it clever how they always land on their feet?' said the Castellan.

'You're seeing the problem now, Madam President...?'

Slowly, Romana crouched and, careful not to touch it, examined the cat more carefully. There was a small metal disk hanging from its collar, engraved in the human alphabet. 'If lost, please return to Schrodinger's Pets, 45, the Broadway, Margate,' she read aloud. 'Oh, bloody hell.'

'It managed to wipe half of the surviving guard corps from the timelines before we pacified it with some Whiskers,' Fnarx explained. 'Probably best not to get too close...'

Romana stood up and backed away from the kitten. 'Can't you just kill it? Break its neck or run it over or something?'

Fnarx gaped at her in horror. 'But it's so cute!'

A malicious laughter began by the door in a rising crescendo. With the exception of Dribble, whose head was in the waste paper basket, all turned to look.

He hissed, 'Here, Kitty!' and threw it a ball of yarn, giggling hysterically.

'No, not Grandfather Paradox!' Dribble cried from under the desk.

'He looks familiar...' whispered Fnarx. 'I'm sure I've seen him before-'

'Hello Fnarx,' said the Grandfather, his lips curling into a thin, cruel smile. 'We meet again...' H laughed. 'I was at your 200th birthday, you were so wasted, you threw up all over Lady Larna...'

Fnarx blinked. 'I fairly sure I would never invite the leader of Faction Paradox to my birthday-'

'You didn't,' moaned Romana. 'It's the Doctor. So, who didn't see that one coming? Grandfath Paradox is the bloody Doctor.'

'Oh, sorry. No, not the Doctor!' Dribble hissed.

Fnarx breathed a sigh of relief. 'Thank God for-' He broke off with a scowl. 'But I didn't invite th Doctor either! How dare you crash-'

'Shut up, this isn't the time.' Romana turned to the Grandfather. 'How did you get in?'

'Aha! It's a paradox!' he giggled. 'I unlocked the door from the inside to let myself in!'

'That's not a paradox, that's just ridiculous,' muttered the Castellan.

'I may have forgotten to shut the door...' murmured Fnarx.

'I just thought I'd invade and gloat as Gallifrey collapses. My thousand year plan finally comes t fruition. See how your control freak instincts are removed from history!' The Grandfather spread hi arm wide, gesturing at the room's three walls. 'Great Gallifrey, reduced to this... A room of non-entities terrified as their world collapses around them, destroyed by the Enemy I created... Mwahahahahaha...

There was a long embarrassed pause. Eventually, Romana spoke, raising a single, perfectly plucked eyebrow. 'You do realise we've just won the War?'

The Grandfather's smile froze. 'What...?'

'And what's more, it's not really an invasion, if you come on your own, is it?'

He spun around. 'The others were with me just a moment ago... I swear, I have friends! I'm no normally alone, honest!'

'In fact, you've messed it up quite nicely, haven't you. Except for a few trigger-happy guards, the fighting has stopped entirely...'

The Grandfather's lip was beginning to wobble quite seriously. He began to stroke the kitten fo comfort

'If it's any consolation,' Fnarx said hurriedly, 'I was really impressed by your Enemy...' Romana rolled her eyes skywards.

'Really?'

'Oh yes. Cute *and* deadly! I was totally astounded by its... purring skills.' The Grandfather seemed to brighten at this. Romana decided to give up on the entire situation as a lost cause. It was time for a long, hot, bubble bath and some random removal of lesser planets from the timelines. The War was won, that was the important thing, now she could relax.

'Out of interest, what happened to your arm?' Fnarx was continuing.

The Grandfather tensed. 'Why do you ask?'

'It's just that, according to the legends, you cut it off because it was the one you used to-'

'Spoiler space!' the Castellan reminded sharply.

Fnarx sighed. 'Well, I thought about that and it doesn't make any sense. Because if you really used it to-' The Castellan was shaking his head sternly. '-To do that very unpleasant thing that we're not allowed to talk about, then surely you wouldn't become the Grandfather and thus cutting your arm off would be... well, a bit silly.'

The Grandfather shrugged. 'It's a bloody Paradox, isn't it! They don't call me Grandfather Paradox for nothing.'

'But it still doesn't make sense!' Fnarx tore the yarn away from the Enemy, and used it to demonstrate the timelines with. The kitten looked distinctly miffed for a moment, before deciding to menace the growing colony of butterflies in the corner. 'If you prevented yourself from coming into existence by doing the very thing that created you, then either you in fact never prevented your own creation, in which case it isn't a paradox; or you did prevent your own creation, the timelines have changed, the loss of the arm is irrelevant, and it still isn't a paradox.' The Captain's visual demonstration of this concluded in a rather embarrassed fashion as he realised he'd accidentally tied his hands together.

'Because it's... I... it's a paradox, it...' He trailed off and sighed. 'Okay, I admit it; it doesn't make sense. But I'm not going to go around calling myself Grandfather Plot Hole because of one silly little mistake.'

'So if that wasn't it, why did you cut off your arm?'

'Ah, well, I more kind of didn't, actually.' He was looking distinctly sheepish. 'It was an industrial accident that happened when I was hop picking in Kent.' The others stared at him. 'You know the sort of thing. I reached into the combine harvester to rescue my coat from being mangled, and... well, one glove too many. Doesn't really bother me. Upper limbs: they're here, they're not here, get used to it.'

There was a long embarrassed pause. The kitten gnawed contentedly on the Sash of Rassilon.

'So basically,' Romana said levelly, 'what you're saying is that Grandfather Paradox- who is, let us remember, the ultimate bogeyman, a figure of terror to Time Lords everywhere, a cancer on Gallifrey, a threat to our very way of life- basically, this mythic figure is in fact the Doctor, with an Anthony Ainley complex, and a rather pointless crippling disability caused by a silly attempt to rescue his coat. Which he loses all but monthly anyway. Is that about right?'

The Grandfather shrugged, but quickly brightened and removed a jar from his jacket pocket. 'I brought you back some hops!' he grinned.

'Oh, for crying out loud!' Romana exploded. 'This is just a bloody joke! I preferred you when you were the curly one. Okay, he wouldn't stop singing 'Do You Think I'm Sexy?' in the shower, and kept phoning up Glasgow taxi firms and asking for lifts back to Kasterborous. But at least he knew how to give a girl a bloody good-'

'Madame President!' The Castellan had turned a shade of purple unknown since Lord Parsell had gone through a decade-long phase of eating nothing but beetroots several centuries earlier, before eventually being found in the wilds outside the Capitol, bemoaning his continuing inability to take root and photosynthesise.

'Honestly, this is too much. I'm surrounded by morons; half my guards no longer existed in the first place, the Doctor has gone nuts and horribly mutilated his upper body, and the Enemy is a misinterpretation of a quantum physics thought experiment. That's just... *silly*. Why is it so hard to find a decent Enemy these days? At least if it had been the People, I would have got some intelligent conversation, a few good parties and probably some casual sex out of it...' The Castellan had to sit down and take some deep breaths. 'You work for centuries to make it to the top, and when you get there-'

'Erm, Romana...'

'What?' she snapped.

'It isn't a big thing,' the Grandfather was saying. 'It's just... Wasn't there a door there a minute ago? You know, for coming in through?'

'The Door of Rassilon, yes,' explained the Castellan. 'We have a single door into the sixth wall of the Presidential chamber to represent the essential unity of one great Gallifrey.' He gestured proudly to the wall in front of him. The blank, featureless, wall in front of him. The one that encircled the room. As it slowly penetrated his consciousness that this was not exactly the situation he'd described, Romana head-butted the table.

The Grandfather was looking around what was now, rather inconveniently, a room with no doors. 'You know, this place reminds me of somewhere...' he was muttering.

Dribble, who had climbed out from under the desk and attempted to back away from both kitten and one-armed lunatic simultaneously, and was consequently now standing with a rather panicked expression on the Presidential filing Cabinet, whispered in terror, 'Well, what do we do now?'

The Grandfather raised and eyebrow and reached into his cloak, pulling out an ominous green package. Dribble squealed and hid his face. 'I brought the Travel Scrabble with me!' the Grandfather said brightly.

'So if it isn't either the Enemy or the Faction who are responsible for this...' She glanced at the Grandfather, who was already attempting to teach the kitten to play scrabble. 'And I think we can assume that it isn't- then who is it who could have done this to us?'

The kitten caught another butterfly between its teeth. The size of the room halved. Dribble fell off the filing cabinet as it relocated itself across the room.

'Oh I say, that's very clever!' said the Grandfather cheerfully.

floor where his chair had been. 'A hurricane I could understand, but that's just silly.'

Fnarx was looking perturbed. 'I don't understand, how is that even possible, it doesn't make any sen-' He stopped suddenly, staring open mouthed at a slip of paper. Romana followed his eyes.

What had once been the top left hand corner of the Arcalian college budget now simply read 'GOTCHA!'

Romana turned around very slowly and stared straight into the Grandfather's eye. 'Doctor... Where exactly did you get this kitten from...?'

The Grandfather frowned thoughtfully. 'Erwin Schrodinger's mistress... Oh what was her name...? Blue hair. Old fashioned. Works in a department store...'

Romana swore.

Dribble frowned. 'You mean it's-?' Romana nodded. 'But she works in a hotel these days!'

'Oh, nobody remembers the sequel.' She began to infodump. 'So... the Celestis have manipulated Grandfather Paradox into creating the Enemy, thus removing Gallifrey from the timelines. They've started the very War that forced them to leave Gallifrey in the first place, and come out of it as the most powerful surviving faction.' She stopped, trying to think of an appropriate way to express her feelings of frustration with the situation. Eventually, she settled on, '*Shit!*'

The Grandfather was looking disheartened. 'They managed a real paradox. That's not fair. Outwitted by the Celestis...'

'No, not the Celestis!' Dribble yelled. The others stared at him. 'Sorry, I wasn't concentrating earlier.'

'I don't believe we've all be manipulated so easily,' Romana said.

Fnarx shook his head. 'To be fair, the Celestis are very-'

'I'm not talking about the Celestis!' Romana snapped. 'I'm talking about Lawrence bloody Miles...

Dribble's eyes widened. 'No, not-'

'Oh, don't bother,' hissed Romana. She bit her lip and thoughtfully examined her nails for a moment. Then she looked up, forcefully, determined on a course of action. 'Right, that's it; we're getting out of here the only way I know how. Castellan?'

'You don't mean...' the old man said, his eyes wild. 'The Reset Switch of Rassilon?' The others in the room all stared at him. 'Look, I don't pick the bloody names!' He opened a drawer of the desk and pulled out a large red button.

The Grandfather bit his lip. 'I really don't think you should do that-'

'Well you wouldn't, would you? It'd destroy all those carefully laid plans, that were yours all along and that you weren't manipulated into in the slightest..' Romana laughed, quite hysterically. The Grandfather wiped his eyes and cuddled the kitten.

'Are you sure about this Romana?' said the Castellan. 'If you go rewriting the timelines on that scale, anything could happen... You could lose your memory, end up on some godforsaken backwards planet... We could even be wiped out of existence altogether, never to have existed...' He trailed off and looked around at the others in the room. 'Although, frankly, I'd rather die than be trapped in here forever, so just get on with it, there's a good President.'

'Thank you for your vote of confidence,' she murmured sarcastically. Then, with one perfectly manicured nail, she depressed the button.

'No, not the reset switch!' screamed Dribble.

In the chaos that followed, Romana broke his nose.

Romana sat up in bed and breathed a long sigh of relief. She was back in her room in the TARDIS; the rickety old Type 40 that she'd travelled the universe in. No, that wasn't right She wasn't back; she'd never left. The night before, they'd been drinking in Cambridge, she'd had one too many drinks in the Emmanuel College bar. She vaguely remembered someone attempting to have sex with a duck, and their having been escorted out after having some kind of punch up with the head porter. It had been a good bender.

E-space and Gallifrey and the War and the Faction... They'd all been nothing more than figments, shadows, caused by the intake of too much suspicious purple liquor. On the downside, she no longer controlled the fate of the universe, and having never regenerated had lost two cup sizes off her breasts; and she was a little concerned about the state of her subconscious, given that she'd imagined both the destruction of her own planet and- worse- a night of passion with a foul smelling Alzarian; but you

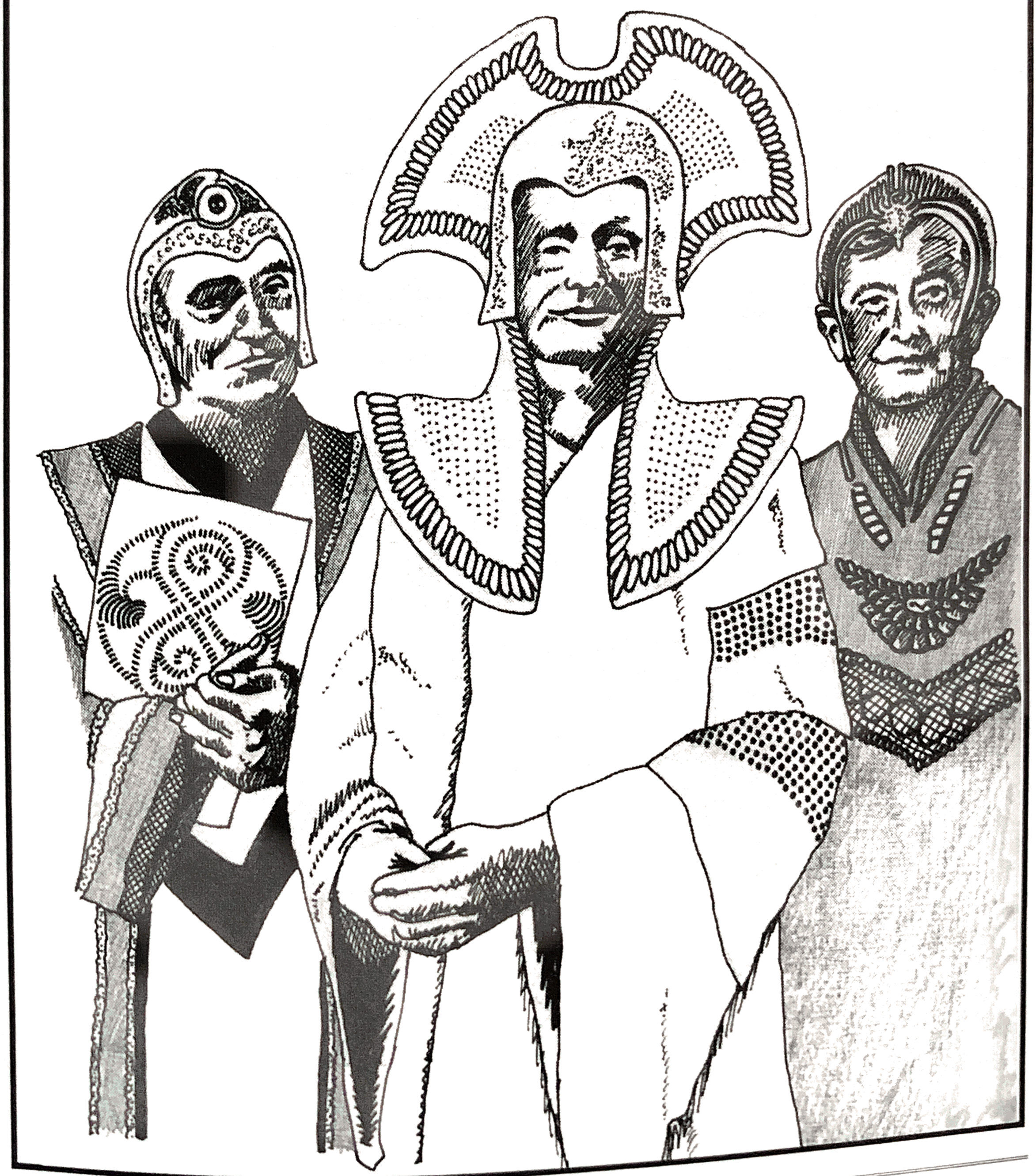
can't have everything.

She slid gently out of bed, and slipped into a robe. She was alone in the room, but both the steam and the strangled strains of 'Do you think I'm sexy?' coming from the next room suggested that her companion was nearby. She followed the telltale scarf out into the corridor, and pushed open the next door. He was there, scrubbing his thighs, curls dripping down his back, still wearing his hat. As he reached the instrumental, he noticed her behind him, flashed her a grin of too many perfect white teeth, and shut off the water.

He'd been better looking without the arm.

He reached out and took her in his arms, giving her a long passionate kiss and gently easing the robe off of her shoulder-

'Doctor,' she whispered over his tongue, 'I've just had the strangest dream...'



Hanging Chads

by Jonathan W Dennis

This is Tallahassee, a city where every government building is shaped according to its function. The Department of Education building is shaped like a Faber eraser. From a helicopter, the prison looks like a pair of handcuffs. The capital building is a tower with two small domed buildings on either side of it. You get the picture.

It is December 2000 in Tallahassee, Florida and a group of black-robed people are about to determine the leader of the United States of America, but not the group of black-robed people that you think.

Now

It was a simple announcement but, aware that the eyes of the world would be on the press conference, Secretary of State Katherine Harris chose to make it herself. Even with all the cameras present, she had gone light on the make-up. When she used too much, it made her feel like a tart. A little glare be damned. It was the message that was important, brief as it was.

'After a full and accurate count of the ballots,' she said. 'It has been determined that Vice-President Al Gore has won by 1025 votes and will be assigned all 25 of Florida's electors.'

Then

Cousins Neville and Marshall cast a hysteresis ward on the armed guards outside the building and slipped inside. Should anyone wish to view the videotapes from the security cameras later (and who would? There was no reason to think that anything had happened.), all they would see would be the inky shimmer of people who no longer quite exist. They reached the safe with no further native encounters. Cousin Neville pulled out the combination, freshly torn from the contractor's notebook 12 years earlier, and deftly spun the dial.

The foot-thick steel door swung open smoothly, soundlessly. The ballot boxes were piled against the near walls, hundreds of individually locked metal boxes stacked from floor to ceiling. There wasn't enough room for them in the rest of the repository. Besides, they would soon be moved to a more permanent home now that the legal proceedings were over. Cousin Marshall's eyes scanned the stacks from behind his mask. He turned to the elder Cousin for guidance.

'Which ones should we take?' he asked.

'It doesn't matter,' said Cousin Neville. 'Just grab a couple and we'll leave.'

Cousin Marshall hauled a couple of boxes from the top of one of the shorter stacks and stuffed them into the transcendental carryall. He exited the room, leaving Cousin Neville to seal the door behind them.

Now

It was a simple announcement but, aware that the eyes of the world would be on the press conference, Secretary of State Katherine Harris chose to make it herself. With all the cameras present, she had had

decided to use a little more make-up than usual. It made her feel less vulnerable, but it wasn't that important. It was the message that was important, brief as it was.

'After a full and accurate count of the ballots,' she said. 'It has been determined that Governor George W. Bush has won by 537 votes and will be assigned all 25 of Florida's electors.'

Then

Cousins Neville and Marshall took a moment to look at the guards trapped in a chronic hysteresis outside the building and slipped inside. They reached the safe with no further native encounters. Through the open door of the safe, they could see their earlier selves contemplating the ballot boxes. Just as the previous iteration of Cousin Neville noticed them, they pulled out their DeMat pistols and disintegrated their earlier selves for good measure.

Cousin Marshall pulled two ballot boxes from the transcendental carryall and placed them on two of the shorter stacks, only a few feet away from where the boxes already sat. He offered a quick muttered thanks to the Grandfather and exited the room, leaving Cousin Neville to seal the door behind them.

Now

It was a simple announcement but, aware that the eyes of the world would be on the press conference, Secretary of State Katherine Harris chose to make it herself. With all the cameras present, she had had decided to use more make-up than usual. It made her feel less vulnerable.

'After a full and accurate count of the ballots,' she said. 'It has been determined that Vice-President Al Gore has won by 3124 votes and will be assigned all 25 of Florida's electors.'

Then

Cousins Neville and Marshall arrived a half an hour earlier than usual. They cast a hysteresis ward on the armed guards outside the building, confounding their first iterations when they arrived, and slipped inside. Cousin Neville dialled the now memorised combination and smoothly opened the door for his companion. This time he closed the door behind them.

Both Cousins pulled out their transcendental carryalls and left them open on the floor by the stacks of ballot boxes, ready for the long night of work ahead of them. When they started removing the ballot boxes from the stacks, they placed them carefully in the first carryall. Before long though, they were tossing them into the black maw of the bag, cursing when they missed and the tossed box clattered loudly off the edge and across the floor.

When all the boxes were safely stowed away, Cousin Neville sealed the carryall and they started on the more delicate task of removing the previously prepared boxes from the second carryall. They paused only twice in their duties, both times to kill their earlier incarnations as they entered the vault.

Once finished, they offered up a brief invocation to the Grandfather and sealed the room behind them.

Now

It wasn't a simple announcement, so Secretary of State Katherine Harris chose to make it herself. With all the cameras present, she had decided to layer on the make-up. She hoped it would serve as some kind of shield between the cameras and her confusion.

'After a full and accurate count of the ballots,' she said. 'It has been determined that Ralph Nader has won by 101,112 votes and will be assigned all 25 of Florida's electors.'

Then

Cousins Neville and Marshall arrived, this time supervised by Brother Carl and Sister Nancy. The elder family members cast a hysteresis ward on the guards outside the building and the group slipped inside. Cousin Neville dialled the now memorised combination and smoothly opened the door for the others.

Inside the vault, the Cousins pulled out their transcendental carryalls and left them open on the floor by the stacks of ballot boxes. They repeated the previous operation, replacing the ballot boxes with ones they had previously prepared. The Brother and Sister watched the operation from their vantage by the door. Occasionally, they urged the Cousins to work faster, reminding them of their lowly place in the Faction, of the need to prove their worth. Other times, they used the unravellers hidden on their persons to reduce the previous iterations of the Cousins to raw biodata for sacrifice later.

Once finished, the group offered up a brief service to the Grandfather and sealed the room behind them.

Now

It wasn't a simple announcement, so Secretary of State Katherine Harris chose to make it herself. With all the cameras present, she had decided to pile on the make-up

'After a full and accurate count of the ballots,' she said. 'It has been determined that the Florida vote for President of the United States of America is split evenly between all 12 candidates running for the office.'

Then

Inside the vault, the Cousins pulled out their transcendental carryalls and unloaded the equipment they would need for the night's work: knives, styli, molecular bonders. While the Brother and Sister watched, occasionally pausing to use their unravellers on the previous iterations of the Cousins and themselves, the Cousins altered each ballot. They added additional votes or carefully bonded chads back into place, making it look like no vote had ever been placed. They altered an entire county's worth of votes to make it seem like a community of Holocaust survivors voted for a Nazi sympathiser.

Once finished, the group performed a service to the Grandfather.

Now

It was a simple announcement.

'It has been determined that Governor George W. Bush has won and will be assigned all 25 of Florida's electors.'

Then

Cousin Neville's hand slips and he cuts the tip of his left index finger. The blood spills across a stack of altered ballots, necessitating additional clean-up work. The incident distracts the Brother and Sister enough that their earlier iterations get the upper hand and kill the recent versions. The earlier versions tell the Cousins to get on with their work and take their places by the door.

Now

'...Vice-President Al Gore has won...'

Then

Newer incarnations of the Brother and Sister arrive and kill both sets of earlier iterations. They tell the Cousins to get on with their work and take their places by the door.

Now

'...Governor George W. Bush...'

Then

The energy requirements of their ship become so great that the continual sacrifice of previous versions of their selves is no longer sufficient to meet their demands. Mother Sheila waits outside of Sonny's Bar-B-Q on Apalachee Parkway, just a couple of miles from where the rest of the cell is working. In just an hour, she will capture Florida State University Head Football Coach Bobby Bowden, the highest paid state employee in Florida, as he exits and sacrifice him to the time altar.

For the first time.

Now

'...Gore...'

This is Tallahassee. It is December 2000. This is still happening. Get used to it.

Walking In Eternity was designed, collated and produced for Factor Fiction by Phil Hall of mediahall ltd (01604) 513867 - phil.hall1@ntlworld.com

WALKING IN ETERNITY

Hoaxes! Dreams! Imaginary Stories! Or Perhaps the Truth?

Stripped of the trademark quarries, corridors and creaky sets, television's most celebrated traveller returns to explore some of the darker (and lighter) corners of the time vortex.

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This collection is given away in exchange for a fixed donation to the Foundation for the Study of Infant Death.

FACTOR FICTION